

Good Will for the Common Good: Nurturing Baptists' Relationships with Jews

Students Guide



Four online adult Sunday school lessons

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Table of Contents

Preface	2
Approaching Wisdom	5
Achieving Balance	12
Exhibiting Courage	18
Establishing Justice	24

A DVD and Leaders Guide for *Good Will for the Common Good: Nurturing Baptists' Relationships with Jews* are also available from Acacia Resources (www.acaciaresources.com).

Preface

"All of us here," rock star Bono said in his 2006 National Prayer Breakfast address, "are searching our souls for how to better serve our family, our community, our nation, our God."

To a racially, ethnically and religiously diverse gathering, he asserted that "the one thing we can all agree, all faiths and ideologies, is that God is with the vulnerable and poor."

But he didn't stop there.

He recalled the words of Jesus: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Lk 6:31).

From Hebrew scripture he quoted the prophet Isaiah:

"Bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, cover him, then your light will break out like the dawn and your recovery will speedily spring forth, then your Lord will be your rear guard" (see Is 58:7-8).

We would be hard pressed to find a more clear and compelling call to work for good will for the common good.

The idea of "common good" is a vision with both moral and theological implications, one that all faith traditions embrace.

Yet the vision has become clouded by selfish individualism, opposing ideologies, contrasting values and an unwillingness to sacrifice. That's why we must repeatedly issue the call and clarify the vision.

The Catholic tradition offers this very workable definition of the common good: “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment.”

In other words, we achieve the common good when the things on which we all depend work in ways that benefit us all. An attitude of good will for the common good carries with it a positive life wish for others.

Achieving the common good is, quite simply, a deliberate choice and a communal effort. *Newsweek* columnist Robert J. Samuelson wrote, “We face a choice between a society where people accept modest sacrifices for a common good or a more contentious society where group selfishly protect their own benefits.”

We make the choice to pursue good will for the common good word by word, action by action. It requires a delicate balance, knowing how much to say and when to keep silent, when to take action and when to pull back.

Mark Twain quipped, “It is better to keep your mouth closed and let people think you are a fool than to open it and remove all doubt.”

Still, silence is not always the most sensible response. Martin Luther King, Jr. advised that, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

When it comes to relationships with Jews, Southern Baptists have a history of ignoring the wisdom of both men, choosing at times to remain silent about things that matter and at other times making imprudent and absurd judgments that reveal ignorance and intolerance.

Many Baptist leaders refused to speak out against anti-Semitism in the 2004 film “The Passion of the Christ.”

In 2003, a Baptist seminary president publicly compared the Jewish faith to a deadly tumor.

Some Baptist pastors and leaders would not participate in interfaith worship services following the events of September 11, 2001.

In 1999, the Southern Baptist Convention’s International Mission Board published a resource encouraging Baptists to pray for the conversion of Jews during their high holy days. The SBC in 1996 adopted a resolution targeting Jews for evangelism.

SBC President Bailey Smith created a firestorm in 1980 when he proclaimed that “God Almighty does not hear the prayers of a Jew.”

Those examples, says Baptist Center for Ethics’ executive director Robert Parham, represent “more Christian love than any group ought to bear.”

The Southern Baptist Convention’s actions and statements toward the Jewish community are deeply troubling, according to a rabbi who has observed and worked with evangelical and fundamentalist Christians for years.

James Rudin, author of *The Baptizing of America: The Religious Right’s Plans for the Rest of Us*, sees as an “immediate and profound threat to our republic.”

Rudin, who has worked with the American Jewish Committee since 1968, asserts that despite the separation of church and state in the U.S. Constitution, he is not certain

“that the Cross will not ultimately dominate and control the Eagle.”

Rudin coined the term “Christocrat” to distinguish most religious conservatives from those he believes are actively engaged in efforts to change America into a faith-based nation where a particular form of Christianity is legally dominant over all other religious communities.

When Rudin and other Jewish leaders met with televangelist Pat Robertson in 1995, he experienced feelings of exclusion and concern. Robertson compared the status of evangelicals in the United States to Jews in Germany under the Nazis and said that there is a “vendetta” and “religious cleansing” aimed at Christian conservatives beginning with the Supreme Court’s removal of school prayer in the early 1960s.

“Christocrats love to quote the Bible literally and point to it as the ultimate authority on all issues of life,” Rudin writes. “Once they have convinced the public that they, and they alone, correctly interpret the Bible, they are then able to label their opponents ‘anti-Bible’ or ‘secular.’ It is a clever, insidious tactic that has, unfortunately, worked too long and too well, and always in the Christocrats’ favor.”

Noticeably absent in much of Southern Baptists’ history with the Jewish community is consistent evidence of the four cardinal virtues: wisdom, temperance, courage and justice. Instead we find silence where wise words and thoughtful actions could have fostered good will; harsh rhetoric where silence and restraint would have shown respect.

Uncertain about what to do and unclear about what steps to take, many moderate Baptists have remained immobile,

perhaps fearful of creating ill will instead of good will. There are, of course, exceptions. Some Baptists understand that the best way to love neighbor is through concrete actions—actions that speak louder than words; actions that demonstrate good will; actions that advance the common good.

Efforts by these Baptists, through various groups and with individual overtures by churches and pastors with synagogues on local levels, have faithfully chipped away at the wall dividing Baptists and Jews.

In recalling his church’s experience sharing worship space with the congregation of the neighboring Temple Emanuel, Southside Baptist Church’s (Birmingham, Ala.) pastor Steve Jones said, “We are unashamedly Christian, they are unashamedly Jewish, and we like each other. We are not going to change them, but we will be changed because of our relationship with them. They are not going to change us, but they will be changed by their relationship with us.”

Many of our Jewish neighbors are eager for a similar relationship. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, in 2003 challenged all of the synagogues of the Reform Jewish Movement to expand interfaith dialogues and cooperative efforts. “We must reach out to our neighbors and listen for God’s presence in their voices,” he said. “Only in this way, speaking our fears while hearing the fears of others, will we build a shared commitment to a moral future.”

To aid synagogues in rising to that challenge, Yoffie’s organization produced a guide for them to use in engaging in dialogue with their Christian neighbors. *Open Doors, Open Minds: Synagogues & Churches Studying Together* enables Jewish and Christian faith communities foster mutual understanding and appreciation, “to see how our

beliefs, values, hopes, and doubts shape our individual and communal lives.”

Writing about the achievements and tensions in Catholic-Jewish relations several years ago, Yoffie said, “Jacob became Israel, and Jewish tradition traces Esau to Rome. The note of reconciliation in the biblical story perfectly describes the relationship between Israel and Rome—that is, between the Jewish people and the Catholic Church.”

We might easily adapt his analogy and amend his language, substituting Baptist for Catholic. “The story of Esau and Jacob begins in conflict and ends in peace,” he said. “They start as rivals but end, simply, as brothers.”

This study guide and its accompanying DVD are designed to help Baptists begin or continue good will efforts among their Jewish neighbors, not with the goal of their conversion to Christianity, but because it is the right thing to do.

As the noted 20th century Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel said, “Remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power. Never forget that you can still do your share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and frustrations and disappointments.”

Above all—first of all—Baptists should reclaim the centrality of Jesus, who taught us to love our neighbors. From this love we can approach wisdom, achieve balance, exhibit courage and establish justice, joining with our Jewish neighbors to work for the common good.

Approaching Wisdom

Theme: Wise thoughts frame wise words and actions.

**Texts: Proverbs 1:2-7
Matthew 7:24-27
James 1:5-8; 3:13-18**

Introduction

At the heart of the relationship between Southern Baptists and Jews is a history marred by dishonesty and insensitivity rather than one marked by wise thoughts, words and actions.

As early as the 1920s, Baptists engaged in deceptive tactics with the Jewish community. In 1921, the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board (HMB) established a department of Jewish work and appointed Jacob Gartenhaus, a Jew who had converted to Christianity, as its first missionary to work exclusively among the Jews.

Gartenhaus held “Jewish-Christian Goodwill Meetings” in churches across the South, announcing such meetings in intentionally vague terms in order to attract a Jewish audience. The meetings were, in fact, evangelistic in nature and designed to convince Jews to convert to Christianity.

A major shift in Baptist-Jewish relations occurred in 1966 with the creation of what eventually became the HMB’s interfaith witness department. For the next two decades,

the Board stressed dialogue to promote understanding instead of conversion efforts among people of other faiths.

With the 1987 election of Larry Lewis as HMB president, the emphasis and approach again shifted. In 1988, after telling HMB administrators that he did not believe Jews needed personal faith in Jesus Christ to be saved, George Sheridan, an interfaith witness department staff member, was forced to leave the Board. Lewis, a fundamentalist, said that Sheridan's views were not shared by most Southern Baptists. Rather than accept a transfer to another area, Sheridan was fired.

In a 1989 HMB restructuring, interfaith witness was moved from the "missions" section to "evangelism," indicating an emphasis again on conversion of Jews over dialogue with them.

With the exception of the climate of dialogue that characterized the era between 1966 and 1987, Baptists for the most part have done little as a denomination to promote authentic understanding of Jews and Judaism, instead more often resorting to labels, stereotypes and caricatures. Statements by prominent Baptist leaders such as Bailey Smith, who in 1980 claimed that "God Almighty does not hear the prayers of a Jew," have persuaded generations of Baptists to think that "we are right and they are wrong."

From this wrong-headed thinking come careless words and thoughtless actions.

When it comes to relationships with the Jewish community, Baptists have largely ignored the cardinal virtue of wisdom, which calls for thought before speech and action. Wisdom is the quality or perspective that enables us to make right judgments and moral decisions, using the knowledge and information available to us.

Apart from biblical wisdom, we lack the ability to make decisions that produce positive results. With it, we understand all of life in relationship with God, gain moral comprehension and can take ethical actions.

Biblical wisdom equips us to foster good will for the common good. It informs how we talk about and to others. It involves thinking through words and actions and their possible consequences.

When Jesus advised his followers to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matt 10:16b), he meant, in C.S. Lewis's words, that we should have "a child's heart" and "a grownup's head." Biblical wisdom allows us to think, speak and act with respect, insight and good judgment. We're wise, Jesus said, when we both hear and act on his words.

The Biblical Witness

Scripture is filled with stories both of people who displayed wisdom and those who sorely lacked it. Each person's story reminds us that God is the source of wisdom, and without God's direct involvement in our lives, we simply make a mess of things.

From the fledgling beginnings of the Hebrew people to their valuable body of wisdom literature to the teachings of Jesus to the letters of James, we discover our need for and the value of wisdom.

Biblical wisdom lies at the core of effective living and positive relating. It colors how we think and consequently what we say and what we do.

Proverbs 1:2-7 Righteousness, Justice and Equity

²For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, ³for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity; ⁴to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young—⁵let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill, ⁶to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles. ⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

What is biblical wisdom? Is it technical ability or skill? Is it shrewdness and pragmatism? Is it intelligence?

Wisdom is all of these, and more, according to Hebrew scripture. The wisdom book from scripture with which we are most familiar, Proverbs, uses the word *wisdom* 41 times. The wisdom of Proverbs is most concerned with developing skills for living everyday life effectively: making wise choices, growing in moral comprehension, acting ethically and understanding all of life in relation to God.

This text begins with good news: We can learn wisdom. This might mean that we have to unlearn some wrong thoughts and ideas. But there is hope for us. We can change. We can gain the wisdom we lack and display it through our attitudes, words and actions.

Gaining wisdom is crucial, because from wisdom come “righteousness, justice, and equity” (v 3). In other words, when we have wisdom, we not only benefit personally by understanding ourselves in relation to God, we can also take actions that make life better for those around us. We will avoid degrading or demeaning others to make ourselves look better. We can do things to help uplift and strengthen them. We can work for justice and fairness for

everyone. Wisdom helps us see others as our brothers and sisters, our equals.

Wisdom and its components of righteousness, justice and discipline equip us with the foundation for seeing the world and its people as God sees them.

In the spring of 2002, Rabbi Sam Stahl of San Antonio’s Temple Beth-El asked his good friend, Charles Foster Johnson, then senior pastor of Trinity Baptist Church, San Antonio, to speak at a pro-Israel rally at the Alamo.

“I shared the rostrum with those whose support for Israel seemed to be predicated on the condemnation—even eradication—of other peoples and nations,” Johnson recalled in a column on EthicsDaily.com. “Much of the speech that day was incendiary and inflammatory, and it incited the crowd to a frenzy of animosity for Palestinians.”

It became clear, Johnson said, that some gathered that day “believed freedom and liberty to be exclusive rewards accorded a few, rather than inalienable rights accorded all persons by virtue of their humanity.

“It was my difficult charge that day to articulate a different vision. I spoke in equally passionate terms of the great contributions Israel has given the family of nations regarding the dignity and worth of the individual, made in the image of a God who is sovereign over all humanity, not just a select portion.

“I spoke of the unprecedented vision of Israel that ‘the Lord our God is one,’ giving humanity the sublime concept of monotheism. I spoke of the democratic imagination that was first fired in the minds of Israel’s prophets, that the

blessing of this sovereign God would be extended to all nations and to all peoples.”

When he finished speaking, Johnson said, “there was no cacophonous applause, no noisy din of cheers—only silence and reflection.

“Perhaps it is easier to get worked up into a rampage of division than it is to be reasoned into a path of peace. But we all know in our hearts which choice the God of Israel would have us make.”

In reflecting on the events of that day, Johnson applied the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: “Unless we learn to live together as brothers and sisters, we will perish as fools.”

God’s people, he said, must “see the community of faith as a centered set rather than a closed set. Let us see the true and living God as the center, a center of love and unity, and all the peoples of the world who seek to love and serve God as moving toward that holy, burning center.”

Godly wisdom grants us that vision.

Matthew 7:24-27 **Both Knowing and Doing**

²⁴ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

While we may hold Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in high esteem and take its teachings very seriously, we’re not always so faithful about acting on those teachings. This particular section from that sermon presents us with such a challenge, because it deals precisely with the kind of life Jesus calls his followers to live. Jesus calls us to live wisely, which means not simply knowing what we ought to do, but actually doing it.

What we do now, Jesus said, affects the future. That’s why what we do is so important. A person who wants to build a house that will be secure in the future and withstand the storms that will come builds wisely. He builds on rock. In building our lives, we build on the foundation of knowing what Jesus said by *doing* what he said. If we know but fail to do, we are foolish and can expect disaster.

Godly wisdom is more than just knowing what Jesus taught and agreeing that it sounds nice. It is also living life as Jesus lived it, authentically, respectfully, purposefully, lovingly.

James 1:5-8 **God’s Way**

⁵ If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. ⁶ But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; ^{7,8} for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

As noted earlier, the concept that wisdom comes from God was strongly rooted in Judaism. By the time James wrote his letter, first-century Jews believed that the Torah, their scriptures, contained God’s wisdom. They became wise,

they believed, by studying the Torah, and they applied this wisdom to serving God.

By reinforcing the idea that God is the source of wisdom, James revealed his Jewish heritage. We should ask God for the wisdom we lack, he said, and God will respond “generously and ungrudgingly” (v 5). God’s nature is to respond to this request without reservation or hesitation and without any reminder about other gifts God has given.

There’s an important stipulation, though: “ask in faith, never doubting” (v 6). At first glance we might dismiss this as not applying to us. “I don’t have any doubts,” we say. “I trust God completely!”

But do we really? Our actions sometimes indicate that we don’t, not because we doubt God’s power or ability, but because we insist on doing things our way instead of God’s way. James called that “being double-minded” (v 8).

Godly wisdom equips us to do things God’s way.

James 3:13-18 **Sow in Peace**

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or

hypocrisy. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

James identified two distinct kinds of wisdom: that which is “from above” (v 15), and that which is “earthly, unspiritual, devilish” (v 15). Each displays itself through certain feelings, attitudes and actions.

Earthly wisdom demonstrates a marked distance and alienation from God and God’s ways. It is characterized by “bitter envy and selfish ambition” (v 14), boastfulness, deceit and “disorder and wickedness of every kind” (v 16). Earthly wisdom leads to trouble and chaos, James said.

Envy seems to be at the root of much of this disorder, and we are all too familiar with the many ways it manifests itself: arrogance, pride, ill will, ruthless ambition, hatred, ignorance, rudeness. Unchecked, it stops at nothing to get what it wants.

Even worse than the communal unrest and turmoil it causes, following this earthly wisdom betrays personal commitment to Christ.

Godly wisdom, on the other hand, results in good works that are characterized by gentleness, purity, peace, compromise and mercy. When we think, speak and act with godly wisdom, we encourage harmony and unity. We remain open to reason and sincerely display compassionate, loving and helpful responses. And we refuse to show partiality.

James used an interesting metaphor to close this portion of his letter. He referred to sewing “a harvest of righteousness” (v 18) as a result of living with godly wisdom. We, like those to whom James wrote, think of a harvest as some-

thing we collect or gather, not something we spread or sew. But James insisted that the rewards of right living are not things we amass and stockpile. We live righteously—with godly wisdom—so that we can affect our community and society in positive ways.

In the case of Baptists' history with Jews, our attitudes and actions do not always reflect God's wisdom. Pride, arrogance, an unwillingness to listen and reason and a forceful insistence on having the final word mean that earthly wisdom has often won out, and our wills have supplanted God's will. Estrangement and mistrust, rather than gentleness and peace, have best characterized many Baptist-Jewish relationships.

Yet our spiritual transformation is ongoing, and in it we have hope that the way things have been are not the way things always must be.

Wisdom Creates Something New

While Bailey Smith's 1980 widely reported public comment that "God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew" inflicted tremendous pain upon members of the Jewish community, a Baptist seminary professor's bold response to that comment offered another view.

Glenn Hinson, at the time a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, wrote an open letter to Smith that appeared in the *Western Recorder*, the newspaper for Kentucky Baptists.

In his letter, Hinson graciously reminded Smith that because of his office of president of the Southern Baptist Convention, "many persons outside this convention may

interpret your words as representative of all Southern Baptists and even as 'official.'"

Affirming each person's right to express his or her personal views, Hinson nonetheless told Smith that "when you speak, people tend to interpret what you say as the 'official' position of the convention." He went on to express his dismay at Smith's comments.

Hinson expressed hope that Smith would "prayerfully rethink" what he said "and make an apology to Jewish people everywhere and beg God's forgiveness for claiming to make judgments" God alone should make. He went on to outline several problems he saw with Smith's proclamation.

"You may have disfranchised Jesus' prayer when you said, 'My friend, God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew.' Jesus was a Jew. He lived and died a Jew. Christianity began with the conviction of the first followers that he had risen from the dead. Though he did not 'deny' he was the messiah, neither did he openly claim, 'I am the messiah.' Others confessed that about him.

"You disfranchised the prayers of everyone from Abraham to Jesus—the entire Old Testament—when you said, 'No one can pray unless he prays through the name of Jesus Christ.' Which of the patriarchs or prophets prayed invoking his name? Neither human reason nor scriptures themselves will support this argument that they did so."

Recalling his decision as an employee at that time of a Southern Baptist seminary to confront and publicly disagree with the president of the SBC, Hinson recently said, "There are times when we must speak."

He closed his letter to Smith by saying, “Statements such as this one are the stuff from which holocausts come.”

Our words are powerful. “If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us,” James said, “we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire” (Jas 3:3-6a).

Godly wisdom harnesses that power and directs it toward meaningful dialogue, the beginning point for courageous actions that generate good will.

Why is this important? It is a matter of Christian discipleship, according to Daniel Goodman, associate professor of New Testament at Gardner-Webb Divinity School who has done extensive research into the history of Southern Baptist-Jewish relations.

Dialogue, he wrote in a column on EthicsDaily.com, “teaches us how to be more authentically Christian” and requires us to “live forwardly.”

It “creates a future for Christians and Jews that our respective pasts simply cannot envision.”

Dialogue also reminds us “that discipleship requires humility” and “religious difference is not failure,” Goodman believes.

“No one wants watered-down Judaism or watered-down Christianity, just to make them look more alike. Jews and Christians do indeed worship the same God and ascribe

authority to shared writings, but we also understand God’s redemption and revelation in starkly different terms. This is difference, not failure.”

Goodman reminds us that in its essence, Christian discipleship “is about becoming new. But to become new, we must cease, in some ways, to be something old. And that, in all of its historical implications, is the promise of Jewish-Christian dialogue for Christian discipleship.”

By developing the virtue of wisdom, we can move from old ways of thinking, speaking and acting to new ways that create a climate of common good.

**Take a closer look at the source
of biblical wisdom and ways to live a wise life
with *Living Wisely, Living Well:
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Achieving Balance

Theme: Balance results from self-control.

**Texts: Exodus 20:8-10
Proverbs 25:28
Matthew 7:12
James 1:19-21
James 2:8-10**

Introduction

With the evolution of language has come significant change in the meanings of words, one of which is *temperance*. Most people today assign as its exclusive meaning complete abstinence from alcohol. Webster, however, defines it as “moderation in action, thought or feeling.” Temperance is deliberate exercise of restraint and avoidance of overindulgence. C.S. Lewis described it as “going the right length and no further.”

Temperance serves as something of an internal traffic light, flashing green when we need to keep moving, yellow when we need to exercise caution and red when we must stop. Ignoring any of these lights can spell disaster, either preventing something from happening that ought to happen, or causing something to happen that should not happen.

We develop the virtue of temperance or balance through consistent and careful self-discipline and self-control.

The pages of history between Baptist and Jews would certainly look different had more Baptists exercised moderation and restraint in their speech and actions. Instead, excessive pride and lack of humility have resulted, as scripture warns, in sin, disgrace and destruction.

When we focus on loving God supremely and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves, we can achieve a balanced, temperate life. God’s presence in us, which gives us “a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline” (2 Tim 1:7), suggests an important combination. By itself, power can be dangerous. Power combined only with self-discipline, lacking love, can be disastrous. Power, love and self-discipline together help us maintain a balance that displays neither extreme nor excessive thoughts, words and actions but instead those marked by respect, restraint and moderation.

The Biblical Witness

Epistle writers including Paul, Timothy and Titus placed a high priority on the virtue of temperance or balance and applied it within a number of contexts.

Paul encouraged the Corinthians to develop a balanced approach to giving just as they excelled “in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you” (2 Cor 8:7). He urged them to achieve “a fair balance” in their generosity (v 14) by finishing what they had earlier begun.

“It is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by com-

pleting it according to your means,” Paul wrote (vv 10b-11). In other words, he said, go the right length and no further.

Timothy viewed temperance as an important quality for bishops, also stressing that they be “sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher” (1 Tim 3:2). After identifying some qualities for deacons, he wrote, “Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things” (v 11).

Titus wrote, “Tell the older men to be temperate, serious, prudent, and sound in faith, in love, and in endurance” (Titus 2:2).

Early Christian leaders saw temperance or balance as an important mark of maturity and a key quality for leaders.

We can achieve this balance, according to scripture, by exercising self-control and displaying love.

Exodus 20:8-10 **Practicing Deliberate Disengagement**

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

By the time Moses received the commandments as recorded in Exodus 20, the Hebrew people were apparently already accustomed to observing sabbath. The earlier account of Exodus 16:5 describes their obedience to the command to gather manna daily except for the seventh day. They were instructed to gather twice the amount they

needed on the sixth day so they could eat on the seventh, the sabbath.

Our noun *sabbath* probably comes from the Hebrew verb meaning “to rest” or “to cease from work.” Sabbath, or *Shabbat*, is at the heart of Judaism and is a “holy” day, completely separate from the other days in the week. In sabbath, God intends that we reconnect to the cycles of life and in doing so renew our relationship with God, others, nature and work.

Emerging from this commandment to keep sabbath are some important concepts for us related to balance, not the least of which is the value of work. In order to cease from working, we must first work. God worked in creation; God commands that we work. But God also commands that we refrain one day each week from that which occupies the other six days. That day “is a sabbath to the LORD your God” (v 10).

By dedicating and setting apart one day of each week to God, we symbolically acknowledge that all time belongs to God. Living with this reality helps instill within us a kind of balance that allows us more wisely to spend all of our days, investing them in things that have value and meaning, things that help build a better world for everyone.

But the sabbath, and therefore achieving the balance it brings, is not just for us. It is also for those with whom we have influence. In Moses’ time, people best understood that to mean children, servants, working animals and “aliens” living in their midst (v 10).

The clear teaching then and now is that practicing sabbath—a deliberate disengagement—creates an opportunity for rest and renewal for everyone and allows all of

creation to regain a sense of equilibrium easily lost in the push and pull of everyday living.

Achieving balance helps us create and restore a sense of well-being.

Proverbs 25:28 **Building a Personal Fortress**

²⁵Like a city breached, without walls, is one who lacks self-control.

The writer of Proverbs gets straight to the point: someone who lacks self-control is as vulnerable as a city with broken-down walls, open to invasion and attacks. On the other hand, someone who has self-discipline and practices self-control is armed with what he or she needs to exhibit strength of character and exercise necessary restraint during times of duress.

Developing self-control is crucial to achieving balance.

Matthew 7:12 **Initiating Love**

¹²"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."

Jesus also went straight to the point, drawing from Hebrew law and reminding us of what became known as the Golden Rule. Put simply, God intends that we be as concerned for the good of others as we are for our own good.

In our humanity, we sometimes employ the Golden Rule so we can get what we want. That is hardly Jesus' intent. The emphasis here is on doing for others, not so that we can

get what we want out of them, but because it is the right thing to do.

Jesus' connection with "the law and the prophets" closely identifies his teaching with the commandment to love God and love neighbor, which Matthew characterized as the summation of the law (Matt 22:40).

Jesus' teaching is foundational: look for the loving thing to do and go ahead and do it, without waiting to see what the other person might do. Act intentionally and take the initiative, rather than reacting in kind.

Simple to understand, but hard to do.

The perspective of Rabbi Marc Kline, Temple Adath Israel, Lexington, Kentucky, offers us some valuable insight. "I have four children," he wrote. "Each of them is incredibly unique. We have four different relationships, and they each address me in different ways. And, each will tell you, 'I am Dad's favorite.'"

"You know what? They are each right. Out of their uniqueness, they each offer me something special. I have to believe that if it works that way in my home, it might at least work that way in God's. I know that despite the diversity of my children, I am still their one father. I have to also believe that despite the many religions of the world, there is still only one God, parent to all of them.

"Now, I know that this flies in the face of some of our theologies. I know that there are those who teach there is only one way to God. I have to wonder for the sake of peace and security if I shouldn't defend the path of another as legitimate as my own, even if that path diverges from the path most familiar and comfortable for me. Over the years, you

Baptists have called this the ‘liberty of conscience.’ As a Rabbi, I certainly don’t have the right to limit God; to tell God when God can and cannot speak; and in what language we are willing to listen. I believe that God understands, and candidly, that is a good enough recommendation for me.”

James Evans, pastor of First Baptist Church, Auburn, Alabama, reminds us that “We are free to pursue God, or not pursue God, in any manner we choose. In order to protect that freedom, however, it is necessary to defend that freedom for everyone.”

“If we think we can enact a Christian nation simply by the power of our majority,” Evans wrote in a column on EthicsDaily.com, “then we know nothing of people or the history of religions. Besides that, Jesus did not counsel us to impose our faith or dominate the faith conversation by marginalizing those who differ from us. Jesus said that we would be known by the way we love God and our neighbor.”

James 1:19-21 Displaying True Strength

¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. ²¹Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

The admonitions in these verses from James begin with an urgent tone: “You must understand this,” James said (v 19). In other words, this is more than important; it is imperative. Pay attention!

In rapid succession, James offered practical handles for living a disciplined, godly life. Each is vital in achieving the balance we need to pursue good will for the common good.

James would heartily concur with the sage who said that God had a reason for giving us two ears but only one mouth. Listen more than you speak, he said, and listen very carefully.

Instead of reacting immediately, he advised that we respond cautiously and wisely, only after thoughtful consideration. Avoid the hasty and irresponsible behavior that often accompanies anger.

James recognized that in order to take on new ways of relating and responding, we have to first rid ourselves of other habits, those things that make us morally unclean. Then we can “welcome with meekness the implanted word” (v 21).

The kind of meekness to which James referred (v 21) is anything but weakness. It requires, in fact, an unusual personal strength. Meekness here essentially means self-control. James implored us to have the kind of personal strength necessary to live out even the most challenging Christian teachings.

James 2:8-10 Loving Neighbor

⁸You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

“Love your neighbor as yourself” was not a new concept (see Lev 19:18b). It was deeply engrained in Jewish life and essentially summarized the teachings of Leviticus 19 and what was expected of the Hebrew people. It was, as James noted, the “royal law.” In fact, Leviticus 19 is one of the most often read and quoted portions of Hebrew scripture in American Reform Judaism.

The instructions in Leviticus 19 also played a key role in shaping the early church. Some Bible scholars believe that James’s letter is somewhat of a sermon based on Leviticus 19:12-18. In fact, theologian Walter C. Kaiser Jr. points out, James commented on each of the verses from that portion of Leviticus 19 with the exception of verse 14.

Because God is holy, the Jews understood that God expected them to live holy lives as they imitated God’s character as God’s people. Both then and now, being a good neighbor, showing particular regard for the poor and the helpless and focusing on many other aspects of social ethics, are all part of holy living for the Jew. The Torah spells out very practical actions in relationship to others that display neighborliness.

James naturally saw loving neighbor in very specific and practical terms. The law for James was not in opposition to his faith; instead, faith lived out the moral core or heart of the law. For James, failing to fulfill the law meant failing God. And failure at any one point of the law meant offense of the whole of the law.

When we are faithful to keep the royal law, James said, we will not make distinctions among people. We won’t show partiality, offer preferential treatment, violate or take advantage of another person in any way or deny another person what is rightfully his or hers. We will act toward people as God acts, with love, compassion, justice and mercy.

Rabbi James Rudin grew up in the 1940s in a community in Arlington, Virginia, surrounded by Southern Baptists. Today he can still vividly recall how he felt when his third-grade teacher, a Southern Baptist, ordered him and two Catholic classmates to leave the classroom while the other children stayed for prayer and Bible reading.

The teacher’s reason for dismissing them? They “were not Protestants.” A classroom environment filled with opportunities for teacher and children to model neighbor love instead left three of those children feeling excluded. It also created a climate in which their deeply-held religious beliefs and traditions were overlooked and essentially labeled invalid or worthless.

Whether we read the words from Leviticus 19 or the epistle of James, God’s expectations for people are clear. Loving our neighbors is not an option. It flows from sincere efforts to reflect God’s character in the world. It is central to the teachings of both Judaism and Christianity. It happens in very tangible ways and involves deliberately doing some things and resisting the urge or temptation to do others, going the right length and stopping when we should.

When we fail to love our neighbors as ourselves, we fail to love God as we should.

Loving others as we love ourselves is not easy, nor is it always natural to us. If it were, scripture would likely be much less specific about it. The fact that both Hebrew and Christian scripture deal in such detail with exactly what loving neighbor means indicates that people have always had a problem living up to God’s expectations.

Failure to love others as we love ourselves also indicates a serious lack of moral balance. When we restore that bal-

ance, we unleash love's unimaginable power, according to Rabbi Fred Guttman of Temple Emmanuel, Greensboro, North Carolina. "Our acts of love can have cosmic significance if we will allow ourselves to believe that when we love one another, we indeed repair the world," he wrote in a column on EthicsDaily.com.

We demonstrate both our faith in God and our love of God in the ways we treat our neighbors. When we love our neighbors as we love ourselves, the balance scales of our lives remain even and steady.

Going the Right Length

We probably all agree in theory that temperance or balance is a necessary quality, yet most of us struggle with moving from theory to practice, particularly when it comes to faithfully telling the gospel story. Is it possible to do so without defaming Jews?

James Browning, assistant professor of religion, Pikeville College, Pikeville, Kentucky, believes we can. Writing for EthicsDaily.com, he offered these important principles:

- Be truthful. "Judaism was not a dead legalism in the time of Jesus, nor were Jewish leaders merely bloodthirsty power-mongers," he says. "First-century C.E. Judaism was a lively assortment of groups, all wrestling with how to be faithful to Torah under Roman oppression. Broad strokes simply won't do in describing Jews in this era, because there was a great diversity of perspectives, parties and platforms within Judaism and its leadership."
- Live with the awareness that the story of Jesus "has a history in Jewish life as well as in Christian life."

Study the history of Jewish persecution by Christians and resolve not to contribute to anti-Judaism. Most Christians would not consider themselves overtly anti-Semitic, but note carefully how more subtle anti-Judaic sentiments may lurk in Christian teachings and portrayal of Jews."

- Act in the spirit of Christ. "Jesus did not treat people as labels or stereotypes or according to social convention," Browning says. "Don't make the Jewish characters in the New Testament, such as 'scribes and Pharisees,' into caricatures. Look for more complex characterizations rather than painting Jewish leaders as the villainous 'guys in black hats.'"

By developing the virtue of balance, we can go "the right length and no further," being faithful to our beliefs while also respecting the beliefs of our Jewish neighbors and defending their rights to hold those beliefs.

Exclusive thinking that says "I have the truth, and everybody else is wrong" can become dangerous, according to Abraham Foxman, head of the Anti-Defamation League. It can, in fact, lead to "hatred of those who belong to other faiths. After all, if you think God intends to subject those others to eternal damnation, surely they must deserve it."

Saying our way is the only way "is a statement of faith," James Evans writes. "It is a belief that we hold in our hearts and practice in our lives. Hopefully our commitment to our belief will deeply impact the quality of our lives and the integrity of our relationships. And, if we are right, then one day we will enjoy the fruits of eternal life and the bliss of God's blessings forever."

Exhibiting Courage

Theme: Courage risks forging new alliances with long-term involvement for the common good.

**Texts: Exodus 1:8-10, 15-17, 22
Exodus 2:1-10
Matthew 6:1-7, 16-18
James 1:22-25**

Introduction

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,” the ancient proverb says. Courage comes in a similar way. An initial step leads to another, followed by still others. Confidence grows. Our willingness to take risks increases, as does our courage.

Even when we have some courage, displaying it usually makes us feel somewhat uncomfortable. There’s always an element of risk involved, always the possibility of rejection.

What is the virtue of courage, and how do we develop it?

Courage combines the elements of unyielding moral strength and endurance regardless of circumstances or threat of adversity. More than a one-time display, it is instead an ongoing quality that, even when shaken, does not crumble.

Courage involves first acknowledging that God is God, and we are not, and that God’s call on our lives is the singular most important pursuit we can follow. It is wholehearted, unflinching commitment to that purpose, even when it means standing alone or standing up to power.

Courage implies the lack of timidity and the willingness to take risks, not with reckless abandon or in a foolhardy sort of way, but for the sake of obedience to God’s call and for the welfare of other people—for the common good.

The steps Baptists have taken toward establishing relationships with their Jewish neighbors have been few and faltering, but they do not need to dictate the future. With courage and with God’s creative investment in and through us, we can build a new and different model for working together.

With courage, we can commit to advancing common values such as separation of church and state, advocating for democracy over theocracy and asserting civility over ideology.

Adults who model courage in facing challenges, maintaining standards, making decisions and nurturing relationships infect teenagers and younger children with courage to forge even deeper relationships in the future.

In order to live life the way God intends for us to live it, we must have spiritual courage, the determination to become all that God created us to be and the willingness to take the necessary risks in that process.

The Biblical Witness

Stories of courage wind their way throughout scripture. Abram and Sarai, David, Daniel, Mary and Joseph, and the ultimate model, Jesus—these and many others illustrate that living life the way God intends requires the kind of courage only God can give.

Abram and Sarai displayed courage by hearing the new voice of God and obeying God’s call to an unknown place and a new way of living.

Jesus showed us how a sure sense of identity fuels courage and allows us to remain connected to those who live as our neighbors, even when we disagree.

Between Abram and Jesus we find other, more obscure models of courage, sometimes in the most unlikely people. Their stories offer us examples of seemingly ordinary, even oppressed individuals who exhibited courage in spite of the risks involved.

Courage Fuels Right Actions Exodus 1:8-10, 15-17, 22

⁸Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” ... ¹⁵The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶“When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” ¹⁷But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ... ²²Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born to

the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.”

In a mighty and powerful one in whom we might expect to find the virtue of courage—the king of Egypt—we instead find fear. The new king perceived the growth of the people of Israel as a threat and worried that they would become so powerful that they would escape. As a result, he would lose an important source of cheap labor.

To counter this apparent threat, he instituted severe forced labor policies on the Israelites. The more he abused and oppressed them, however, the more their population increased. And the more frightened and irrational he became.

When harsh labor didn’t work, he next tried genocide, commanding the midwives who assisted the Hebrew women in giving birth, “if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live” (v 16).

Enter Shiphrah and Puah, two Hebrew midwives who had every reason to fear the Egyptian king and everything to lose if they disobeyed his orders. Yet courage compelled them to do just that. Because they “feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live” (v 17). It was the right thing to do, and the only thing they could do.

Motivated by fear, Egypt’s king, who scripture here does not identify by name, became irrational, abusive, destructive, even murderous. Fueled by courage, two otherwise unknown women named Shiphrah and Puah became defiant, life-giving risk-takers God used to sustain God’s people.

Courage Seizes Opportunities Exodus 2:1-10

¹Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ²The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. ⁴His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. ⁵The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. ⁶When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. ⁷Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" ⁸Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. ⁹Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

The birth and early life of Moses, the one who would ultimately lead the Hebrew people to defeat their Egyptian captors, began as a dangerous act of defiance. According to Pharaoh's orders, he should have been killed at birth. Interestingly, the very river into which Pharaoh had instructed the midwives to toss the male Hebrew babies was the river into which Moses' mother placed the basket carrying him.

Scripture does not tell us whether Moses' mother knew Pharaoh's daughter regularly bathed near where she placed him in the river. But when the princess saw the basket, "she sent her maid to bring it" (v 5). She knew immediately upon seeing the crying baby inside that he "must be one of the Hebrews' children" (v 6), a child her father had sentenced to death. Yet she "took pity on him" (v 6) and immediately forged a special relationship with him.

Quietly observing all of this was the baby's sister, who offered to go and get help "from the Hebrew women to nurse the child" (v 7). The princess seemed to accept the girl's offer immediately, and the girl subsequently returned with the baby's mother.

"Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages," (v 9) the princess told the mother. Not only had she defied her father's orders in sparing the baby's life, she also paid the baby's mother from her father's coffers to take care of him.

In yet another remarkable twist, the mother returned her son to Pharaoh's daughter, and "she took him as her son" (v 10). Because of the courage of three unnamed women, this Hebrew child who was not supposed to live grew instead to receive the finest education and training and become one of the Hebrew people's great leaders.

Though female, uneducated, Hebrew and captive, Moses' mother and sister displayed the kind of courage necessary to recognize and take advantage of the opportunities God placed in their path. Like the midwives who spared the lives of male Hebrew babies, they could not remain silent or fail to take right actions, in spite of the risks.

“Our lives begin to end,” Martin Luther King Jr. said, “the day we become silent about things that matter.”

Courage compels us to seize the opportunities to speak and act on things that matter, in ways that are life-giving and life-sustaining.

Courage Acts from Proper Motives Matthew 6:1-7, 16-18

¹“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ²So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁷When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. . . . ¹⁶And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

At the heart of this important section from Jesus’ teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is the issue of motive. Worship, almsgiving (acts of charity), prayer and fasting are bedrock components of Jewish life. As a Jew, Jesus certainly practiced them, and his teaching here indicates that he expected his followers would too.

His strongly worded statements related to giving alms, praying and fasting were not indictments against these important disciplines nor were they an attempt to create divisions among people of faith. His statements that alms “be done in secret” (v 4) and that individuals who pray “go into your room and shut the door” (v 6) do not indicate that these disciplines at all times be done secretly. Both private and public expressions of these acts were part of Jewish life.

Jesus instead addressed these practices to encourage authentic expressions of faith and warn against improper motives. He was concerned that those who worship understand the nature of authentic piety.

Motive, Jesus said, is critical. The “hypocrites” and those with mightily worded prayers are concerned about receiving recognition and affirmation from others. Those with proper motive are concerned only with pleasing God.

Neither Jesus nor Matthew in his recording of Jesus’ teaching makes any distinction between acts of worship toward God and acts of mercy, justice and love toward others. They are inseparable, and each should be God-centered rather than designed to draw any kind of commendation from others.

In a display of great courage, Jesus exposed the false piety he observed and challenged those who were devoted to

God to demonstrate that devotion out of pure and proper motives. He backed his words with personal actions that demonstrated his obedience to God's call by risking regular interaction with those whose understanding of God's kingdom often clashed with his.

Courage enables us to live as Jesus lived, from pure and right motives that challenge wrong speech and actions and demonstrate genuine love of God and love of neighbor.

Courage Does the Will of God James 1:22-25

²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they look like. ²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

Just as Jesus was troubled by “hypocrites” who acted from impure motives, James was concerned with inauthentic disciples. They are easy to spot, he said.

Inauthentic disciples hear but do nothing, similar to looking at their reflection in a mirror but immediately forgetting what they look like once they turn away. The instruction has been wasted on them. It makes no impact on their lives, and consequently, their lives make little impact on the lives of others or on the advance of God's will.

Real disciples both hear the word and act on it. Their faith is evidenced by their actions. They “persevere” (v 25), courageously persisting in doing the will of God.

The faith James described is not an easy faith. It requires deliberate, unwavering, completely-sold-out commitment. It requires the virtue of courage.

Courage equips us to move from simply hearing the word of God and giving verbal assent to it to doing the will of God.

Authentic Relationships, Enriched Lives

Gary Burton has been pastor of Pintlala Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, since 1972, but he says he had “never thought of interacting with Montgomery's Jewish community” until challenged to do so by Robert Parham of the Baptist Center for Ethics.

Burton served on BCE's Board of Directors for a number of years and was involved with Parham in planning and promoting the June 2004 luncheon designed to generate a new era of improved relations between the Baptist and Jewish communities.

When Parham challenged BCE board members individually to form such friendships, Burton recalls thinking Parham “was nuts.”

“My leadership role on the BCE board and Parham's persistence to bring healing to an ever-widening breach between two religions and two cultures pushed me to the edge of discomfort,” he recalls.

Still, “one morning in the spring of 2004 I took a deep breath, swallowed hard and sent a carefully-worded email to Rabbi Steve Listfield of the Agudath Israel Synagogue suggesting we meet for coffee.”

The two talked by phone. Burton acknowledges that Rabbi Listfield “had every right to be suspicious given the climate of moral arrogance often demonstrated by Baptist leaders.”

After they had met for coffee, he says, “the die was cast for a flourishing and famous friendship,” Burton says. Coffee breaks were soon followed by an invitation to Burton and his wife, Jerrie, to join Rabbi Listfield and his wife, Leslie, at their home for a Memorial Day weekend cookout.

“I was very curious to know what a Jewish rabbi would be cooking on the outdoor grill,” Burton says.

Also in the party that evening was Father David Tokarz of St. Bede Roman Catholic Church.

People sometimes joke about a rabbi, a priest and a minister, but says Burton, “This friendship is no joke.” After their cookout, the three “emerged with authentic friendships transcending theological and cultural differences.”

Burton says he used to worry about what his Baptist friends would think about his friendship with Rabbi Listfield. But neither of them has “compromised our theology, our approach to matters of faith. Montgomery, Alabama would be greatly deficient without Steve Listfield and his leadership. And I would be severely diminished as a person.

“Give up this friendship?” Burton says. “Those are fighting words. I have repented often for the insular life I had lived for so many years.”

Acting from proper motives and seizing available opportunities, Burton and Listfield demonstrated that loving God means loving neighbor and working together for the betterment of the entire community. In their relationship we find both model and challenge.

Baptists can exhibit courage in their relationships with Jews by:

- Reclaiming and reaffirming the best of Baptist traditions, including soul competency, religious liberty and separation of church and state.

Faith is a personal matter between each person and his or her Creator. Governmental authority cannot dictate faith and should not succumb to pressure from a majority faith group.

In her role with the Texas Christian Life Commission, Suzii Paynter says, “One of the voices that I hear from our Jewish friends is ‘Where are you? Will you speak up? If you (Christians) are the majority, if you do have strength, why won’t you speak up on behalf of people who are persecuted?’”

One of the ways we guarantee religious liberty, she says, is to honor each person’s expressions toward God and acknowledge the right of every person to worship as he or she pleases.

- Respecting the biblical scholarship and understandings of Jewish friends and learning from them.

Many Jews have read not only Hebrew scripture but also the New Testament. We can affirm beliefs we hold in common and respect their right to hold beliefs that differ from ours. We must also refuse to be intimidated by those who push a narrow biblical interpretation, a frightened world view and a reactionary framework for social engagement.

Allow Jesus and your understanding of him to guide your understanding of scripture and how you should live and relate.

These actions are risky. They invite criticism and skepticism. But combined with courage, they can steer us into a new era of relationships with our Jewish neighbors that will enrich not only individuals and families but communities as well.

Courage compels us to seize the opportunities to speak and act on things that matter, in ways that are life-giving and life-sustaining.

Establishing Justice

Theme: God-centered living compels us to seek justice.

**Texts: Amos 5:10-15
Matthew 5:6, 14-16
James 2:14-26**

Introduction

On a spring night in Nashville, Tennessee, at least 447 homeless people slept outdoors, while 1,358 others found shelter in various facilities across the city.

Eight months later on Thanksgiving Day, 7,800 people paid between \$18 and \$30 each to participate in the Boulevard Bolt, a five-mile race along Nashville’s prestigious Belle Meade Boulevard.

Proceeds from the race went to local organizations that help homeless people; in 2006, that figure totaled \$150,000.

What makes the Boulevard Bolt unique is that its organizers are the congregations of the three churches inside Belle Meade city limits: Congregation Ohabai Shalom, Immanuel Baptist Church and St. George’s Episcopal Church.

United in their commitment to pursue justice for those who struggle with homelessness and its associated problems,

the three congregations began sponsoring the annual race in 1994. It has grown every year, both in the number of race participants and in the number of agencies that benefit from its proceeds.

Together these congregations demonstrate their love of God by showing love to their neighbors and their commitment to work for the common good.

Each spring, agencies that benefit the homeless can apply for funds from the Boulevard Bolt. An allocations committee composed of a member from each of the three organizing congregations determines funding priorities and selects the organizations that will receive money from that year's race.

The Oasis Center, one of the organizations that received funds from the 2005 race, offers the only continuum of services in middle Tennessee for youth 13-21 who are in crisis, have run away or are experiencing homelessness.

Sometimes justice comes in the form of a one-way bus ticket for a runaway's return trip home. At other times, justice confronts longer-term issues that have no simple solutions: homelessness, mental health care and substance abuse, for example.

From a commitment to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength and to love neighbor as self flows a commitment to establish justice. God is just, deals with us fairly and expects that we deal with each other the same way. Working together for the common good must include deliberate and consistent efforts to establish justice for everyone.

The virtue of justice is characterized by truthful, fair, unbiased and open-minded treatment of all people. Justice

seeks what is right both for individuals and for communities.

Pursuing justice also means working against systems that mistreat, overlook or take advantage of those who are weaker, less fortunate or in the minority.

We begin to establish justice for all people when we first embrace the virtue of justice personally and seek to relate justly to people whose faith traditions are both similar to and different from our own.

Why should moderate Baptists and Jews work together for justice?

Both share a common commitment to the prophetic tradition. Working for justice fulfills the commandment to love God and love neighbor.

Both share a minority position in a culture dominated by the religious right. Both offer a different yet compelling view that:

- advances civil rights.
- values the separation of church and state and seeks to keep strong the wall that separates the two.
- counters threats to the environment and practices good stewardship of the Earth and its resources, recognizing them as some of God's good gifts to us.
- works to alleviate poverty and eliminate its causes.
- challenges congregants to establish patterns of giving money, time and self.

On these and many other issues, thoughtful Baptists and Jews can from their commitment to God-centered living work together to establish justice.

The Biblical Witness

Justice lies in the core of God's character, according to biblical writers. Isaiah wrote that "the Lord is a God of justice" (Isa 30:18) and quoted God as saying, "For I the Lord love justice" (Isa 61:8; see also Ps 33:5 and 37:28).

Not only does God love justice, God executes justice. "The Lord works . . . justice for all who are oppressed," the Psalmist says (Ps 103:6). "The Lord maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor" (Ps 140:12).

God also expects that God's people will pursue justice. As the people of Israel were forming, Moses instructed them as to what God wants: "You must not distort justice. . . . Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue" (Deut 16:19-20).

Hebrew prophets like Amos later condemned the exploitation of the poor, dishonest business practices and bribery of officials. Amos also warned that a society characterized by injustice could expect harsh judgment.

We can pursue justice on both personal and social levels. Pure thoughts and motives and honest, truthful and respectful relationships with others reflect personal righteousness, or right-living.

We advance social justice when we work to build a society that protects those without adequate legal representation, meets the nutritional needs of the very young and the elderly, secures housing for the homeless and ensures equal

employment opportunities for everyone, regardless of gender, race or age.

Love Good Amos 5:10-15

¹⁰They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. ¹¹Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. ¹²For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. ¹³Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. ¹⁴Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. ¹⁵Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

During a time of economic prosperity and affluence in Israel's history, God called Amos, a herdsman and tree-trimmer, to deliver an unpopular message of impending judgment from God. Central to God's complaint against Israel was their perversion of justice.

So far from God's standards of ethical behavior had Israel strayed that they had grown to "hate" those who tried to uphold justice and "abhor" those who spoke the truth (v 10).

Community elders typically sat "in the gate" (v 10) in seats cut in the wall at the city's entrance. Day by day, they would hear complaints, settle disputes and render judgments. But the established system had become so faulty that a poor

person with no power or influence who once could have expected to receive impartial treatment could no longer be assured of that. Those listening to the cases were not interested in hearing the truth or gathering all the facts. Justice was impossible because those in power refused to hear “the whole truth.”

If that weren't bad enough, Amos said, wealthier people were guilty of mistreating the poor (v 11), likely either unfairly taxing them or requiring unreasonable amounts of grain from them in return for rental on the land. By taking advantage of those who had little, they had acquired their luxurious “houses of hewn stone” and “pleasant vineyards.” But Amos warned that they would not be permitted to enjoy these ill-gotten gains.

There was still more, Amos said. Selfishness overshadowed the pursuit of justice. The “righteous” were subject to affliction at the hands of the powerful. The powerful were guilty of offering and taking bribes. And those who had the means to help those in need were guilty of ignoring that responsibility, instead pushing aside “the needy in the gate” (v 12).

Instead of justice forming the foundation for a healthy society, its perversion was leading Israel farther and farther from God and God's desires for them. Both the legal and the economic systems favored the rich and powerful and slighted the poor. Justice was a dim memory.

Verse 13 is difficult to understand. What did Amos mean when he said, “Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time”? Surely Amos would have welcomed those who would speak out against the corruption they saw. That is what he was doing, after all.

It's possible that Amos was acknowledging that it could be personally dangerous for “whistleblowers” who dared to speak out against dishonesty and corruption. Or he might have been referring to the time when future judgment would come. In either case, things were far from right. It was, Amos said, “an evil time.”

Amos then issued a call to justice, to the pursuit of right living. “Seek good and not evil,” he warned (v 14). And perhaps to make sure no one missed his point, he stated it another way: “Hate evil and love good,” (v 15).

In Hebrew, both *love* and *hate* refer not simply to feelings but also to choices and decisions. Amos's call was for the deliberate actions of rejecting evil, choosing goodness and pursuing justice.

True religion, Amos said, seeks not only a right relationship with God but also good for fellow human beings.

The message of Amos is more than a record of a time in Israel's history. It is a message for all of God's people about how God expects us to live. We show our love for God by how we treat each other, especially the poor, the powerless and the disenfranchised.

Shine the Spotlight of Truth and Right Matthew 5:6, 14-16

⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” ... ¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they

may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Righteousness—actively doing the will of God—is a dominant thread in Matthew’s gospel. Those who “hunger and thirst” for it, Jesus said in this beatitude, “will be filled.”

Beatitudes were not new to Jesus’ listeners. They had been used within Jewish tradition for centuries, particularly in wisdom and prophetic writings. Their purpose was to declare that certain people were in privileged or fortunate circumstances.

Those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” and live with the hope and certainty that the will of God will prevail are “blessed,” even though living this way may appear foolish or hopeless at times. God will prove them right in the end, Jesus said.

But Jesus’ words are more than a reassurance that all wrongs will eventually be righted. They are a call to his followers to keep at the pursuit of justice.

Immediately following the Beatitudes in verses 1-12, Matthew records Jesus’ use of three back-to-back metaphors describing his followers: salt (v 13), light and a city on a hill (v 14). What was his point?

Jesus’ followers must have an active role in the world. Just as the purpose of light is not to be seen for its own sake but to illuminate the darkness so that other things can be seen as they really are, Jesus’ followers must shine the spotlight of truth and right. Jesus’ followers must pursue justice.

Like a city on a hill, Jesus calls his followers to positions where they cannot go unnoticed. Following Jesus has more

than a personal and private component. Discipleship “goes public,” reflecting the qualities of salt and light and living as a city on a hill.

Real Faith James 2:14-26

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. ¹⁸But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. ²⁰Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? ²¹Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. ²³Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? ²⁶For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

This passage can be particularly difficult for some people, especially Baptists, because they believe it stands in opposition to Paul’s teaching that we are justified by grace through faith alone, apart from works (see Rom 4, Gal 3).

But to take this passage out of its context and contrast it with Paul is to distort its meaning.

James did not deny the value or necessity of faith. Instead, he believed that authentic faith results in “works”—helping meet the basic human needs of others, for example (vv 15-16).

Christian discipleship involves much more than holding the “right” beliefs. Those beliefs without the accompanying right actions are “dead,” James said (v 17). Right beliefs alone do not constitute faith, but merely intellectual assent, and even those forces in opposition to God have that degree of belief (v 19). There is a direct relationship and unity between attitudes and actions, and one cannot substitute for the other.

It’s not a matter of choosing to have faith or to do works. The two are interwoven. If a person has faith, he or she will demonstrate it with complimentary actions. The starting point lies at the heart of Judaism—the *Shema*. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (see Deut 6:4-9).

We demonstrate the reality of our faith and of our right relationship with God, James said, by our conduct. He used two familiar examples: Abraham, whose “faith was active along with his works” and whose “faith was brought to completion by the works” (v 22); and Rahab (v 25), who in the Jewish tradition symbolizes repentance. The actions of both Abraham and Rahab gave evidence of their faith.

James said that real faith, rooted in a right relationship with God, cannot and does not ignore people in need. In fact, it honors and cares for them.

Justice for All

The Hebrew term for charity is *zedakah*, a derivative of *zedek*, which means “justice,” “righteousness” or “fairness.”

For the Jew, charity is far more than rendering aid or giving assistance. “It is, in every sense, a religious act, a way of relating to God, by whose ‘charity’ we survive,” according to Rabbi Maurice Lamm, president of the National Institute for Jewish Hospice and Professor at RIETS at Yeshiva University’s Rabbinical Seminary in New York.

“God gave limited resources to people,” Lamm said in an interview. “Some garner a greater share, some a lesser share. But since all are created equally in the image of God, there is a duty that devolves upon the ‘haves’ to give of their substance to the ‘have-nots’ in order to effect justice and to enable the ‘have-nots’ to survive, as they themselves do.”

Suzi Paynter, leader of the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, is hopeful about the future in terms of justice for every person. Within the Baptist tradition and the wider evangelical community, she sees “more and more attention to the justice aspect of scripture—the red-letters of the gospel, to what Jesus said and did.” These, she says, are helping shape our priorities, and our solid tradition of hands-on ministry allows us avenues to see where established systems need to be challenged and reformed.

Throughout both Hebrew and Christian scripture we find commands to show the same kind of concern for the poor and oppressed as God shows. If we fail at this, scripture says, we are really not God’s people at all.

If we are truly God's people, we—Baptist and Jews together—can do no less than to pursue justice for everyone, not just in our country but around the world.

We can work together to see that the poor, hungry, homeless, children, elderly, minorities, those who are uninsured and underinsured, the unemployed, those holding jobs but barely holding on, the uneducated, the displaced—any and all who lack what they need—begin to live the kind of lives God wants them to live.

Thoughtful Baptists and Jews can work together for:

- affordable, safe housing for those who lack it.
- a health care system that will allow the millions of people without insurance the opportunity to visit a doctor instead of the emergency room.
- the creation of living-wage jobs so that people who are willing and able to work can support themselves and their families.
- school system finance reform, to ensure adequate and equitable funding for every school district.
- sustainable immigration policies that will be fair to immigrants and useful to the country.
- nursing home reform that will protect the sick, frail and elderly from danger and abuse and provide them with the quality care they deserve
- changes in the foster care system to insure that children receive what they need and what is best for them.

- affordable child care options for single working mothers.
- legislation that prohibits displays of the Ten Commandments in public buildings and other efforts to promote a state-sponsored religion.

From God-centered living, the virtue of justice can “roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Am 5:24).

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**We make the choice
to pursue good will
for the common good
word by word,
action by action.**

**It requires a delicate balance,
knowing how much to say
and when to keep silent,
when to take action
and when to pull back.**