

LOVE FOR A STANGER

WEEKLY THEME:

FAITH REQUIRES MUTUAL LOVE

BASED ON:

Hebrews 13:1–3; 1 Corinthians 13

KEEP IN MIND:

1 Corinthians 13:13

FROM YOUR BIBLE:

The Scripture text is in the student lesson under “Learning From God.”

PURPOSE OF THE LESSON

During this lesson, Juniors will define Christian love and discuss the implications of such love, reflect on the ways they experience Christian love in their lives, and learn how to practice love as it is rooted in their faith in Christ.

BEFORE YOU TEACH

1. Suggested Materials—Bibles, student magazines, pens or pencils.

2. Lesson Background—For background information, read Hebrews 13:1–6; 1 Corinthians 13. Be sure to read the student lesson. Also see Bible Study Guide 5 in the white pages of this book, as well as in the UMI Annual Commentary, *Precepts for Living*®.

There are several spiritual gifts in the body of Christ. The greatest of these is love (“charity,” KJV). People search for a workable and reliable definition of love, but the best one can be found in the Bible. The writer of Hebrews and 1 Corinthians define love and tell us that it is greater than faith and hope.

Juniors may not understand the biblical definition of love. They may not understand that Christian love is to be put into action each day through such acts as patience, kindness, forgiveness, and unselfishness. Their definition of love may be influenced by pop culture and may need to be corrected. They should be taught that Christian love calls them to love others as well as themselves. They should be taught that God’s love for them enables them to love others. They should also be taught that faith requires love.

OPEN THE LESSON
Get Started Activity

Review last week’s “Doing My Part” activity. Then play a variation of the game “Categories” where the category is love. Have each Junior give a word that defines or gives an example of love.

What’s It All About?

Teaching time about 4–8 minutes

Student Story: Love For A Stranger

The neighborhood children called him names. They snickered and laughed every time they passed him asking for money on the corner in his wheelchair. Some would yell for him to get a job. Priscilla felt bad every time she witnessed this, but she never said anything.

One time when Priscilla and her friends walked past, one of the kids asked what had happened to him. He said he had been in an accident and lost his leg. He couldn’t work anymore, so he had also lost his home. He said he stays at a local shelter when room is available.

The kids had heard enough and began to walk away—everyone, that is, but Priscilla. Instead, she kindly said, “What’s your name, sir? I want to give your name to my parents. They run the food pantry at my church. Maybe we can help you. Will you be here tomorrow?”

How do you think the man felt after Priscilla talked to him? Why do you think some children (and even adults) make fun of misfortunate people instead of helping them? Would you call what Priscilla did an act of love? Why or why not? When you show love, are you showing faith? Explain.

PRESENT THE SCRIPTURES

Learning From God

Teaching time about 10–15 minutes

Allow volunteers to read the Scripture verses and answer the questions included in the student magazine. Then have Juniors discuss something they learned about love that they didn't know before. Explain that love is greater than all other spiritual gifts. Also explain that God is love. Discuss how we experience God's love and how Juniors can practice love each day.

What I Have Learned

Teaching time about 5–8 minutes

Review today's Scripture passages and fill in the blanks with some characteristics of love.

Answers will vary slightly but should include characteristics found in 1 Corinthians 13:4–7

Juniorway® Bible Activities

For additional material, see the activity for this lesson in the *JBA® (Juniorway® Bible Activities)* book.

Keep In Mind

Teaching time about 2–3 minutes

Recite the verse aloud several times. Add a clap or beat with each repetition until you have created your own melody to aid Juniors in memorization.

EXPLORE THE MEANING

Choosing What's Best

Teaching time about 4–8 minutes

Juniors are instructed to recall a time when they practiced love as defined in the Scripture. If they haven't done so, they are to consider how they can practice this type of love. Share your own experience before selecting volunteers.

NEXT STEPS FOR APPLICATION

Doing My Part

Teaching time about 2–3 minutes

Juniors are challenged to put Christian love into action each day. Pray with Juniors, asking God to enable them to show love.

NOTES

[illegible]

Faith Requires Mutual Love

Bible Background • HEBREWS 13:1–6; 1 CORINTHIANS 13 | Printed Text • HEBREWS 13:1–3; 1 CORINTHIANS 13 | Devotional Reading • JOHN 13:31–35

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: DEFINE Christian love and discuss its implications; REFLECT on the ways we experience Christian love in our lives; and PRACTICE love as it is rooted in our faith in Christ.

In Focus

Joyce was president of the church's Usher Board. She was always on time, dressed impeccably in the standard black and white uniform with white gloves, and knew all of the hand signals. Whenever Joyce was on duty, the members had their envelopes and fans before they requested them; she would immediately move forward when she heard crying babies—firmly removing them from their parents' arms and delivering them to the nursery so the services could proceed quietly.

As she moved about the sanctuary this morning, Joyce was clearly irritated. She had met with the pastor on Saturday afternoon, and he had been critical of her work. The pastor had complimented Joyce on her faithfulness and dedication. He had even praised her as one of his most reliable members. However, the pastor had gone on to tell her that while it appeared that she enjoyed being an usher, unfortunately, he was concerned that she didn't love the members. Her actions seemed to resemble duty and order more than love and affection, which was not what was best for the congregation.

Nothing can replace our love for others. Working on their behalf is fine, but it is meaningless unless our work is motivated by love. In today's lesson, we will see how Christian love is essential to effective ministry.

Keep in Mind

"And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."
(1 Corinthians 13:13, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV **Hebrews 13:1** Let brotherly love continue.

2 Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

3 Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.

1 Corinthians 13:1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

4 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

8 Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

10 But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

11 When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

12 For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

13 And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

The People, Places, and Times

Corinth. Located in southern Greece, about 50 miles from Athens, the Corinth of the ancient world was actually a city that had been destroyed by Rome in 146 B.C., and then rebuilt by the emperor, Julius Caesar in 46-45 B.C. A Roman colony, Corinth was the capital of the province of Achaia.

Corinth was socially, culturally, and religiously diverse. In fact, in 49 A.D. a good number of Jews who were expelled from Rome resettled in Corinth. The Christians of Corinth reflected the diversity of the city. Congregations included the wealthy, merchants, enslaved individuals, and those who were formerly enslaved.

Corinth was home to numerous temples dedicated to pagan gods and goddesses including

Apollo, Hermes, Isis, Poseidon, and the Pantheon, which is a temple dedicated to all of the gods. When Paul arrived in Corinth (about 50 A.D.) the city's reputation for immorality was widely recognized. The infamous temple of Aphrodite had fallen into ruins but was home to hundreds of "temple prostitutes," making it popular with the numerous sailors visiting the city. The Greek word *korinthiazesthai*, which means to live like a Corinthian, meant that one lived immorally.

Background

In Paul's letter to the believers in Corinth, we see the challenges that faced the early church. Corinth was a large metropolis with a diverse population. The house churches that the Corinthian Christians worshiped in

reflected the city's diversity. One issue Paul addressed to the Corinthians was unity among themselves, emphasizing the importance of their relationships with one another.

At-A-Glance

1. A Plea for Brotherly Love
(Hebrews 13:1–3)
2. Love is the Basis of Our Faith
(1 Corinthians 13:1–3)
3. Love is the Proof of Our Gifts
(vv. 4–7)
4. Love is Permanent (vv. 8–13)

In Depth

1. A Plea for Brotherly Love (Hebrews 13:1–3)

The Scripture opens with “Let brotherly love continue.” Our world is full of hurting people, who in turn only know how to hurt other people. As a result, our newspapers and online and TV news reports are full of stories detailing terrible murders and horrific assaults committed by and on people in every age group. Thank God that believers who have found forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ have a new and divine nature. Because of Christ's forgiveness, we are capable of loving others in a deeper and more spiritual way. We are now capable of loving the way that God loves us. However, this capacity to love one another must be exercised. Each day, we have to plead as Jesus did, “nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (see Matthew 26:39). It is our love for God that must be the source of our love for others.

We want to remember that verse 1 is not a request nor a mere suggestion. This reminds us that there is a possibility for our love for one another to stop. Two possible reasons are failure to ask for forgiveness when we sin and

refusing to forgive someone who hurts us. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us to ask God to “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12).

Hebrews 13:3 hearkens to customs of the Ancient Near East. In that time, people traveled great distances on foot. It was a common practice for a family to provide a meal and night's lodging to traveling strangers. Our world is very different today, and the expectation to open one's doors to a stranger hardly seems reasonable. We can, however, ask God to provide us with opportunities to assist strangers and share with them. Hospitality is a hallmark of Christianity. We want to show the same grace and kindness toward strangers that God has shown toward us. Jesus taught that, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40).

Hebrews 13:3 offers yet another motivation for our Christian hospitality. The Scripture says that in doing this, we might be visited by an angel. The Old Testament has many accounts of people who were visited by angels of God. However, the word “angel” translated here means a “messenger” and not necessarily a divine creature. While a present-day angel may never actually visit most saints, God's human messengers will most certainly visit us when we express Christian hospitality.

2. Love is the Basis of Our Faith (1 Corinthians 13:1–3)

We want to remember that when Paul wrote this letter, he was keenly aware of the Corinthians' fascination with the gifts of the Spirit. They were attracted to knowledge, prophecy, and speaking in tongues. Paul is teaching that these gifts were meaningless without love. When Paul speaks of “charity” we should read that word as “love.” More importantly, we should know that Paul is speaking of a specific form of love. He is not talking about *eros*, or the sensuous

or erotic form of love. Nor is Paul describing *philia*, which means “a brotherly affection or friendship.” Rather, Paul is describing *agape*, “a commitment of the will to cherish and uphold another person.” In the Bible, this is the form of love that is always used when we describe God’s love. *Agape* describes our willful and deliberate decision to treat others with the utmost care and concern and allows us to esteem the best interests of our brother or sister above our own.

We must remember that this form of love is only possible when we love God first. Without this, the love toward one another is a sham, a mere imitation. This prerequisite is demonstrated in the Scripture when we read that there are two great commandments. The first is, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.” The second is, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 22:37, 39; Mark 12:30–31; Luke 10:27).

When Paul speaks of “tongues of men and angels,” he is not primarily describing *glossolalia*, or speaking in tongues. Rather, he is saying that it is more important to act lovingly than to be able to speak all the languages of heaven or earth. That definitely includes the conduct of those who practiced *glossolalia*. Without love, Paul is saying, the ability to communicate is useless. Similarly, Paul tells us that if he was able to explain all the mysteries of the Scriptures, but he wasn’t a loving person, it would be meaningless.

3. Love is the Proof of Our Gifts (vv. 4–7)

Contrary to what many of us believe, love is not an ethereal (heavenly) notion. Love is practical and must be put into practice on a daily basis. Christians must constantly measure their love and ask themselves, “Did I show love in that situation or toward that person?” And, more importantly, “Am I growing?” Paul shows that love can indeed be measured and that love results in characteristics that can be seen and heard.

4. Love is Permanent (vv. 8–13)

True love will produce patience, kindness, and honesty. As Christians, we have to identify and remove things from our lives that prohibit us from being able to manifest these qualities of love. Paul identifies these hindrances as jealousy, boastfulness, resentment, and ill temperament. He understood that when Jesus returned, sin and death would end. He knew that the gifts of the Spirit would no longer be needed. Paul uses two analogies to support this. First, it would be unimaginable to think that a mature adult would resort to childlike behavior. Secondly, an actual portrayal of a person could never be obtained by looking at a reflection of poor quality. Paul was teaching the Corinthians and us that when Christ returns, Christians would have direct access to Him. Our relationship with Him will be personal and intimate. Paul was trying to dispel the Corinthians’ pride in temporary supernatural gifts. Much of Paul’s ministry had been spent teaching about the importance of faith and hope. Now, he places love right alongside them, and in fact, elevates love above the others.

Search the Scriptures

1. According to Paul, what is necessary for any service or ministry to be of value (1 Corinthians 13:3)?
2. After our spiritual gifts cease to exist, what will remain (v. 13)?

Discuss the Meaning

If all spiritual gifts are predicated on love, why do some workers within the churches seem to believe or behave as though it is not essential to Christian ministry efforts?

Liberating Lesson

Paul makes it clear that for the believer, love is the key. It is love that enables us to reproduce the very character of Jesus Christ in our lives and in

our ministry efforts. It is only when we have love that we can access the other fruit of the Spirit. Without love, we cannot genuinely be patient, peaceful, good, gentle, or display any of the other qualities. We may be able to imitate them, but without love, they won't be a part of our character; nor will we be able to fully embrace them in order to do the Kingdom-building work Christ has commissioned us to do.

Application for Activation

We are often frustrated in our work in churches. Sometimes it feels as though others are not as committed as we are. Over the next week, pray and ask God to reveal to you areas where you may have failed to demonstrate love toward your co-laborers. Then, ask God what you can do to remedy the situation. Also, ask Him how to show love to those who don't show it to you. It may call for you to make apologies and seek forgiveness and forgive others.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

Sources:

- Bruce, F. F. *The Epistle to the Hebrews, Revised: New International Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. Reprint, 1985.
- "Corinth at the Time of Paul's Arrival." Global Ministries, United Methodist Women. <http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/corinthians/city.stm> (accessed September 13, 2011).
- Dictionary.com. <http://dictionary.reference.com/> (accessed September 13, 2011).
- Guthrie, Donald. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Letter to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Hebrews: A Commentary. The New Testament Library*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.
- Lane, William L. Hebrews 9-13. *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 47B*. Dallas, TX: Word Inc., 1991.
- "New Testament Greek Lexicon." Bible Study Tools.com. <http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek> (accessed September 13, 2011).
- Padfield, David. "The Biblical City of Corinth," 2005. <http://www.padfield.com/acrobat/history/corinth.pdf> (accessed September 13, 2011).

Say It Correctly

Corinth. **KAWR**-inth, **KOR**-inth.
Hermes. **HUR**-meez.
Poseidon. poh-**SI**-duhn.
Pantheon. **PAN**-thee-on, -uhn

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

I Love You, O Lord
(Psalm 18:1–6)

TUESDAY

Faithful Love
(Deuteronomy 7:7–11)

WEDNESDAY

Obedient Love
(Deuteronomy 5:6–10)

THURSDAY

Taught to Love
(Deuteronomy 6:1–9)

FRIDAY

Love One Another
(John 13:31–35)

SATURDAY

Love Your Enemies
(Luke 6:27–36)

SUNDAY

Faith, Hope, and Love
(Hebrews 13:1–3; 1 Corinthians 13)

Notes

SPEAK BOLDLY AND TRUTHFULLY

WEEKLY THEME:

STEPHEN'S ARREST AND SPEECH

BASED ON:

Acts 6:8–7:2a

KEEP IN MIND:

Acts 6:8

FROM YOUR BIBLE:

The Scripture text is in the student lesson under "Learning From God."

PURPOSE OF THE LESSON

During this lesson, Juniors will discuss the stand that Stephen took as a response to his faith, feel motivated to confront powers of our day, and learn how to seek the power and wisdom of the Spirit in their efforts to speak truth.

BEFORE YOU TEACH

1. Suggested Materials—Bibles, student magazines, index cards, pens or pencils, paper.

2. Lesson Background—For background information, read Acts 6:8–7:53. Be sure to read the student lesson. Also see Bible Study Guide 6 in the white pages of this book, as well as in the UMI Annual Commentary, *Precepts for Living*®.

We live in a world where everyone is encouraged to speak their minds, often in inappropriate or disrespectful ways. Children are learning to blurt out what seems right or funny in the moment, even if it is unkind or untrue. Children argue more and more with those in authority—even their parents or guardians. While it is important for Juniors to understand that God wants them to be confident speakers, and to speak out against principalities and powers of our day, they have to learn to do so in the right way—the way that glorifies God. This can only be done by seeking the help of the Holy Spirit, as exemplified in today's lesson.

OPEN THE LESSON

Get Started Activity

Review last week's "Doing My Part" activity. Then ask Juniors to think of an issue in their community that needs to be dealt with. Give

them paper, and have each write a short note to a community leader expressing his or her concern and how they'd like to see the issue addressed. Allow volunteers to read their letter and have the class critique the tone of the letter.

What's It All About?

Teaching time about 4–8 minutes

Student Story: Speak Boldly and Truthfully

Principal: Thank you for coming here today as student representatives. I want to work with staff and students to make our school a better place. I'd like to begin by discussing the rising numbers of disciplinary actions occurring here. What do you think can be done about this?

Student 1: Fire some of the teachers! A lot of times, they write us up or give us a detention just because they don't like us. This school is messed up!

Student 2: First, thank you for inviting me. I asked some other students how we could make this school better and we came up with a list of ideas. (*He gives list to principal.*) We feel that, yes, sometimes kids get in trouble when they shouldn't, but we also agree that sometimes students get out of line. If you look at number three on our list, we suggest that a few times during the year, we review all rules and procedures so everyone knows what is expected from each other.

(*Student 1 shakes his head and points.*)

Student 1: I knew it! I knew it! (*To principal.*) He's only here to get extra credit. They said you were doing bad in math and would get extra credit for making the teachers look good.

Student 2: (*Calmly*) That's not true. I am here because I care about this school and want it to be a good place to learn.

How was the first student's approach different from that of the second student? Whose approach do you think was more effective? Explain. How does speaking with a confident, yet respectful, voice reflect God's ways? Where can you seek help when you need courage to speak—especially when you need to speak up for Christ?

PRESENT THE SCRIPTURES

Learning From God

Teaching time about 10–15 minutes

After volunteers read the passage, have them describe Stephen. Then discuss why Stephen was brought before the council. How was it that he was able to speak truthfully and boldly in front of the council, even though lies were being told about him? Ask Juniors to give their opinions why it is noted that Stephen's face was like that of an angel.

Discuss how Juniors should confront the principalities and powers of our day. Can they trust God to give them the courage and the words to speak in difficult situations? Why or why not? Have Juniors ever had to speak boldly in an uncomfortable situation? Allow volunteers to describe their experience.

What I Have Learned

Teaching time about 5–8 minutes

Juniors will write the word or phrase that completes each sentence.

Answers:

1. Stephen was full of God's **power**.
2. Stephen spoke with **wisdom**.
3. Men from a **synagogue** planned against Stephen.
4. They got others to say things that were **untrue**.
5. They said Stephen was speaking against Moses and against **God**.
6. They said Stephen taught that **Jesus** would destroy their holy place.
7. Stephen was taken before the **high priest**.
8. Stephen's face looked like that of an **angel**.
9. Stephen spoke **boldly** for God.

Juniorway® Bible Activities

For additional material, see the activity for this lesson in the *JBA® (Juniorway® Bible Activities)* book.

Keep In Mind

Teaching time about 2–3 minutes

Repeat the verse aloud several times. Then give each child an index card. Instruct them to write half of the verse on one side of the card, and half on the other side. They can practice memorizing the verse by supplying the section missing from the side of the card they are reading.

EXPLORE THE MEANING

Choosing What's Best

Teaching time about 4–8 minutes

Juniors are instructed to choose one of the situations listed and create a short script that demonstrates speaking with the power and the wisdom of God's Spirit. Allow volunteers to read their script.

NEXT STEPS FOR APPLICATION

Doing My Part

Teaching time about 2–3 minutes

Juniors are challenged to ask God for help in their efforts to speak truthfully. Ask a Junior to volunteer to pray such a prayer to end class.

NOTES

Stephen's Arrest and Speech

Bible Background • ACTS 6:8–7:53

Printed Text • ACTS 6:8–7:2A | Devotional Reading • PROVERBS 8:1–11

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: DISCUSS the stand that Stephen took as a response to his faith; FEEL motivated to confront principalities and powers of our day; and SEEK the power and wisdom of the Spirit in our efforts to speak truth.

In Focus

Cleveland volunteered at the city-run homeless shelter. He was a hard worker with a cheerful attitude. Ms. Martin, the supervisor, was very happy with Cleveland's participation, especially because she seemed short of volunteers.

One day, she overheard Cleveland telling Jesse, a man living at the shelter, that the reason for his joy was Jesus. Jesse asked him how he could get this "Jesus joy."

So Cleveland explained, "First, we tell Jesus that we are sorry for our sins. Then we thank Him for dying on the cross to take the punishment for our sins. And lastly, we ask Jesus to save us." Right then and there, Cleveland and Jesse bowed their heads, and Jesse asked Jesus to save him.

Now Cleveland's joy was so great, he felt like he could walk on air. But just as he was going back to clean up food that a child had dropped, Ms. Martin came up to him with anger written all over her face.

"Cleveland, this is a government-sponsored facility so you cannot come here and talk about your religion!"

How do you think Cleveland will respond to Ms. Martin? What will he say? Have you ever had someone challenge your Christian witness?

Today we will see how Stephen was able to witness with great power and grace.

Keep in Mind

"And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people."
(Acts 6:8, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV Acts 6:8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

9 Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.

10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

11 Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God.

12 And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council,

13 And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:

14 For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.

15 And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

7:1 Then said the high priest, Are these things so?

2a And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken;

The People, Places, and Times

Synagogue of the Libertines (Freedmen). Jews who were born in the Holy Land and spent most of their lives there spoke Aramaic, which was a form of the ancient Hebrew in which our Old Testament is written. But there were other Jews born in other places who had returned to Palestine, and they did not know Aramaic or Hebrew. They only spoke Greek, which was the language of the educated people of the day. Perhaps they had been slaves in other countries, but now they were all proud to be free people. Some of them came from Cyrene, an important city located in what is modern-day Libya in northern Africa. Others came from Alexandria, the chief city of Egypt, and others came from Cilicia and Asia. Ephesus was a grand city located in Asia Minor. Tarsus, where Paul was born, was located in the northern part of Asia Minor in what is now known as Syria.

Pious Greek-speaking Jews attended the Synagogue of Libertines or Freedmen. Paul would have attended this synagogue, and Barnabas probably did also. Among all these

Greek-speaking Jews were a few Christians, but the most outspoken was Stephen. The Holy Spirit spoke through him as he reasoned, discussed, and argued for Jesus Christ.

Background

At the beginning of Acts 6, the early Christians were having problems. The Aramaic-speaking Jews were probably attending the big Temple in Jerusalem. But the early Jewish Christians, who spoke Greek, were attending the Synagogue of the Freedmen. The Jews had the wonderful custom of collecting donations for the poor among them; thus, the early Christians followed this custom and gave to needy widows. (Widows in those days had few ways to raise money to feed themselves, much less their children if they had any.)

The apostles were among the Aramaic Jews and were the early Christian leaders. They were in charge of the distribution of gifts to the widows, yet they were forgetting the Greek-speaking Christian widows. This could have been because of snobbery, because of language

differences or because they just overlooked the Greek-speaking poor.

The godly solution of the apostles was to appoint Greek-speaking Jewish Christians to take charge of distributing food and money to the widows and other poor among them. The Greek-speaking Christians would know who was in need. The seven men chosen for this task were also chosen for their outstanding spirituality. Among them were Philip and Stephen, who is the focus of today's lesson.

At-A-Glance

1. Introduction of Stephen (Acts 6:8–10)
2. Opposition to Stephen (vv. 11–14)
3. Stephen's Effect on the Sanhedrin (vv. 15–7:2a)

In Depth

1. Introduction of Stephen (Acts 6:8–10)

Stephen did much more than hand out gifts to the needy. Until this time, Scripture had only mentioned the apostles performing miracles, but now we see Stephen doing great wonders. (We'll read later of the miracles that Philip performed). Scripture tells us the reason for Stephen's ability to perform miracles is that he is full of grace and power. We would expect to hear about the power in conjunction with miracles, but maybe we are surprised by the accompaniment of grace. Grace is always an unmerited gift of God. Therefore, we see that God working through Stephen, not because Stephen is so wonderful, but because God is wonderful and empowered him to do these amazing things.

At this time, all Christians were converted Jews and all attended synagogues. The Christian Jews were a tiny minority among the other Jews. The Jews whose primary language was Greek attended the Synagogue of the Freedmen. As Stephen, who

attended this synagogue, performed miracles in the name of Jesus, other Jewish members who did not follow Christ opposed. They debated with Stephen, but their arguments did not stand up against him for two reasons. First of all, the Holy Spirit was enabling him to use great wisdom. Secondly, the things that Stephen said concerning Jesus Christ were true.

2. Opposition to Stephen (vv. 11–14)

Those who opposed Stephen thought they were defending things that good Jews believed, but they were probably jealous of him as well. Obviously, Stephen garnered a lot of attention from the miracles he performed and his brilliant exposition of the true meaning of Old Testament Scriptures.

Opposition spread from the Synagogue of the Freedmen to the great temple in Jerusalem and to the influential Jews who had also opposed Jesus. As a result, they seized Stephen and brought him before the great Jewish religious council, the Sanhedrin. This was the same religious council that put Jesus on trial. As they had with Jesus, they also brought false witnesses against Stephen and used some of the same arguments.

They accused Stephen of speaking against the Temple in Jerusalem. They said the Jesus he preached about had threatened to destroy the Temple. In John 2:19, Jesus said that if they destroyed "this temple," meaning His body, He would raise it again in three days. We know that they were twisting the words of both Jesus and Stephen without really trying to understand the message.

In addition, they accused both Stephen and Jesus of trying to destroy the Old Testament Law, again twisting their words. Jesus said He came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). And because they were accusing Stephen of speaking about the Temple and the Law, they were in essence accusing him of speaking against God.

3. Stephen's Effect on the Sanhedrin (vv. 15–7:2a)

When Stephen's accusers finished what they had to say, they noticed his face looked like that of an angel. We are sure this does not mean he resembled the childlike pictures of angels we often see portrayed nor is it likely that he looked like some type of avenging angel. But because we have never looked into the face of an angel, we can only imagine a face that reflected the holiness of God Himself.

At that point, the high priest asked Stephen whether the charges of his accusers were true. This was probably Caiaphas, the very same man who had presided over the trial of Jesus. But that did not scare Stephen, who then launched into a history of the Jewish people, including their rejection of the prophets that God sent and finally the crucifixion of their Savior. The result of Stephen's sermon was that he was stoned and received by Jesus into heaven.

Search the Scriptures

1. How did Stephen communicate the Gospel to people (Acts 6:8–10)?
2. What did the false witnesses testify that Stephen said (v. 14)?
3. As the council looked upon Stephen's face, what did they see (v. 15)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Stephen was mighty in both miracles and words. Do you think you must have these abilities to witness to others about Jesus Christ? What are the characteristics we need to witness effectively concerning Jesus?
2. Stephen had wonderful spiritual gifts and he was very proactive in using them, yet it seemed he had a short time on earth before he died. Why do you think God would allow him to be sacrificed after such a brief time as a Christian? Acts 8:1 tells us that Saul was watching all this. Do you think Stephen's martyrdom had any influence on Saul?

What other things happened as a result of Stephen's death? Acts 8:1 reveals one of those things.

Liberating Lesson

In the days of Stephen, Jewish society was very religious. Christians retained some of the good things from the religious Jews, such as collecting contributions for the poor, and thus the Christians made regular gifts to the widows, the most vulnerable in their society. Unlike the context of Stephen's ministry, our society today is continuing to become increasingly secular. But even though the people of Stephen's day were very religious, they were extremely hostile to the Good News of Jesus Christ. In our society, people are seemingly becoming more hostile to the Jesus of the Bible. What are some of the things that evoke hostility to the Christian message today? How do these things compare to the type of hostility in Stephen's day? What are some ways we can reverse this trend? Stephen, the other deacons, and the apostles demonstrated the love of Christ in the things they did for the poor. How can similar programs help prepare the way for our Christian witness?

Application for Activation

What are some situations when you think you could be a witness to the message of Jesus Christ? What are some of the things keeping you from speaking out? Ask God to empower you to tell people about our Lord. Ask Him to give you wisdom for the things to say and do. Before you speak up for Christ, demonstrate your love for others in the things you do.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

Sources:

Bruce, F. F. *The Epistle to the Hebrews, Revised: New International Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983.

Dictionary.com. <http://dictionary.reference.com/> (accessed September 19, 2011).

“New Testament Greek Lexicon.” Bible Study Tools.com. <http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek> (accessed September 19, 2011).

The NIV Study Bible. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995.

Stott, John. *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990.

Say It Correctly

Suborn. suh-**BORN**.

Cyrenians. si-**REE**-nee-uhnz.

Alexandrians. al-ig-**ZAN**-dree-uhnz.

Libertines. **LIB**-er-teens.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Barriers between You and Your God
(Isaiah 59:1–8)

TUESDAY

Falsehood, Deceit, and Deception
(Jeremiah 8:22–9:9)

WEDNESDAY

These Things You Shall Do
(Zechariah 8:14–19)

THURSDAY

My Mouth Will Utter Truth
(Proverbs 8:1–11)

FRIDAY

Guided into All the Truth
(John 16:12–15)

SATURDAY

Full of Faith and the Spirit
(Acts 6:1–7)

SUNDAY

Full of Grace and Power
(Acts 6:8–7:2a)

Notes
