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The Double-minded Dilemma

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Imagine feeling a constant barrage of ideas from people in the community or governing officials whose demands gnaw away at your faith in Jesus. What to believe? Who to trust? If that resonates, then you've much in common with the early Christians dispersed from Jerusalem in the first century.

It is to these beleaguered faithful that The Letter of James is addressed. The author offers advice on how to live a good life, a life of faith in the face of such tumult.

It is considered in the tradition of wisdom literature of such as Proverbs or Job. This type of writing just tells it like it is, describing life in all its messiness and possibility.

Please pray with me...

God of grace, you have given us minds to know you, hearts to love you, and voices to sing your praise. And yet, we get distracted from you and the good life you offer. Silence in us any voice but your voice that we may be startled with your truth revealed in hearing your word. Amen.

James 1:1-7

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the dispersion: greetings.

²My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, ³because you know that the testing

of your faith produces endurance; ⁴and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

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

A *New York Times*' article "How to Handle the Dreaded Reply-all Moment" describes the sinking feeling you get when you realize you have suddenly broadcast to a group of recipients a message that was to be private or maybe a bit snarky.

I've known first-hand how it feels when my fingers were not connected with my brain, embarrassing me, and prompting *mea culpas*.

The article suggests the sinking feeling needs a new name: "maybe e-barrassment. Or forwardboding. Or sent

insensibility.”¹ None of these silly words describe the sick pit in your stomach.

The reply-all dilemma is part of a larger challenge we slip into by thinking multi-tasking is a boost to productivity. Can I really be engaged in the care and feeding of my email inbox while on a conference call or listening to a podcast? No.

Am I able to peruse the newspaper, start dinner, carry on a conversation with my husband, and listen to the news at the same time? That is a recipe for rudeness.

Multi-tasking is just a euphemism for not paying attention, causing calamities that drain rather than boost productivity.

One company’s solution to email’s “reply-all” trap was to disable the feature. Shouldn’t we start focusing on what we are doing instead?

Whenever we try to do two things, we muddle our brain. When we try to serve two masters, we fragment our lives. Fragmented lives cannot withstand the trials that will surely

¹ David Pogue, “How to Handle the Dreaded ‘Reply All Moment,’” *The New York Times*, accessed January 20, 2019,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/smarter-living/crowdwise-reply-all-embarrassment-email-etiquette.html>

Jennifer E. Davis, “Multitasking and how it affects your brain health, Brown Healthy, Brown University, January 23, 2023 <https://www.brownhealth.org/bell/multitasking-and-how-it-affects-your-brain-health>

befall us. Fragmented lives miss the wonder that God reveals to us and for us.

Financial titan John Bogle, the founder of the Vanguard Funds, revolutionized mutual fund investing with the belief that investors could not outsmart the market over the long term.

He also doubted if investment advisors could truly care about their customers' interests when they were paid from commissions and driven by profit growth for the firm's shareholders.

To focus exclusively on the customer, Bogle created the first index funds. These mutual funds invested broadly in the market, diversified the investment risks, eliminated expensive analysis, and reduced trade volumes.

By design, it created lower costs. In addition, he conceived of Vanguard as a *mutual* firm with the customer benefiting from the profits.

There was nothing glamorous about the idea: it was just transparent and beneficial to the customer. Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Samuelson praised Bogle's creation as equal in importance to "the invention of the wheel, wine and cheese, the alphabet, and Gutenberg printing."

Wall Street did not shower it with such fanfare when the index fund gained popularity. Quite the opposite, Bogle was ridiculed with derision of “who would want only average returns?” Time and profits proved the individual investor would benefit.

Warren Buffet told the *Wall Street Journal*, “If all investors had heeded his ideas, they would be hundreds of billions of dollars better off than they are now.”²

Before his death, Bogle spoke at his alma mater, Princeton University, of the origin of his business philosophy at a conference on faith and leadership.

Shortly after he finished college, both of his parents died in quick succession. With so much thrust upon him, he recalls how sorely his faith was tested. Yet, these trials brought him to feel more deeply convicted of the promise from God -- that this life is not the end and how we live has infinite consequences.

With humility, he claims he survived only by having faith in something far greater than himself. This faith influenced all

² Jason Zweig and Sarah Krouse, “John C. Bogle, Founder of Vanguard Group, Dies at 89,” *The Wall Street Journal*, accessed January 20, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/john-c-bogle-founder-of-vanguard-group-dies-11547677745?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=1>

aspects of his life – including his work – and credits it with holding him through the storms of life.

Bogle cited scriptures' warning, "you may not serve two masters" as cautioning against duplicitous loyalties that would pit customer against shareholder. He relied upon the inner wisdom of all religions – the golden rule. "The golden rule is its own reward – not making yourself wealthy."³

For all the wealth among investors built through the Vanguard Fund, Bogle's riches paled with his peers.

If we were to keep score on financial terms, by the most ubiquitous lens used on Wall Street, he lost. At the time of Bogle's death his net worth was generally estimated at \$80 million. Edward C. Johnson III, the chairman of Fidelity Investments, tallied a net worth of \$7.4 billion.⁴

Bogle's devotion to faith was even more costly in that he gave away half his income each year. Giving became a joy since Bogle cared less about measuring wealth. He claims that he

³ John Bogle and David Miller, "Faith and Ethics in the Executive Suite: A Protestant Perspective." *Faith and Work Initiative*, Princeton University, accessed January 27, 2019, <https://faithandwork.princeton.edu/node/246>

⁴ Edward Wyatt, "John C. Bogle, Founder of Financial Giant Vanguard, Is Dead at 89," *The New York Times*, accessed January 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/16/obituaries/john-bogle-vanguard-dead.html>

weathered the storms of life by an inherent faith of God: God was the only master he would serve.

“Attention is the beginning of devotion” is an oft-quoted phrase composed by the poet Mary Oliver.

Her sparse writing lends itself well to bumper stickers or inspirational Pinterest posts. As a prolific author, with more than 20 volumes of verse and a Pulitzer Prize as well as National Book award, this humble author was a phenomenon in her own lifetime – often rare for poets who usually die in obscurity.

Oliver was typically averse to interviews, wanting her work to speak for itself. But on one occasion, she spoke glancingly of sexual abuse in her childhood.

It was a very bad childhood for everybody, every member of the household, not just myself, I think. And I escaped it, barely, with years of trouble. I got saved by the beauty of the world.

As a child, she stopped going to Sunday School, unable to accept Christ’s resurrection. Although she dropped out of organized faith on Sunday mornings, she pondered the

resurrection for the rest of her life. Oliver paid attention to creation's mysteries.

She looked with a patient eye at the graceful movements of the grasshopper and wild goose, wrote soul-stirring verses of what the canine-human relationship reveals about the meaning of our own lives, and pursued a life full of purpose and presence. From wisdom gained through years of endurance, Oliver believed it is always insufficient to try to put words around God, what God is or who God is.

But her wonder and quest to try to describe the divine she encountered created a life that was endlessly fascinating and satisfying.⁵ In a collection of essays, *Upstream*, she writes of the journey to finding wisdom:

Knowledge has entertained me and it has shaped me and it has failed me. Something in me still starves. In what is probably the most serious inquiry of my life, I have begun to look past reason, past the provable, in other directions. Now I think there is only one subject worth my attention and that is the...spiritual side of the

⁵ Krista Tippet and Mary Oliver, "Mary Oliver: Listening to the World," transcript, *On Being with Krista Tippet*, accessed January 20, 2019, <https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-listening-to-the-world-jan2019/> and Ben Faber, "Observing the Everywhere," *Convivium*, accessed Jan 30, 2019, <https://www.convivium.ca/articles/observing-the-everywhere>

world and, with this recognition, the condition of my own spiritual state. ⁶

Mary Oliver held a lens of faith to the world. She saw creation without the distortion of secular arrogance that instilled in her a reverence for God's capacity to create and recreate. With such wisdom etched into her soul, she was also able to imagine the grace that would cover her at the end of life.

The financial titan John Bogle and woman of words, Mary Oliver, appear to have lived lives of polar opposites.

Armed with sophisticated economic theory Bogle calculated seemingly obtuse financial products while Oliver spent her life wandering through the woods with a spiral notebook and a pencil in hand. But they had so much in common: they faced devastating losses early, were tested by heartbreak, and labored with undivided loyalty.

Both lived as though they had embraced the wisdom from James' letter which counsels, "You will face trials in life...let the testing of faith bring you endurance...and if you lack, turn to God."

God promises resilience to those who ask in faith. Wisdom is always a gift for those with the patience and persistence to

⁶ Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays*, (New York, Penguin Press, 2016), p. 153.

look for guidance from God. Wisdom is never a human achievement.

This writer never presents the early Christians as moral superheroes. When they endure the trials from nay-sayers and those who demand opposing loyalty, this letter reminds them to depend upon God.

Our mindset determines what we will see as we look at the world. Are we open to seeing creation as a wonder given to us by God? As the wind throws us off balance, what will we cling to for stability? When the world tells us we are not worthy, will we turn to God, who always assures us of our inherent loveliness?

Pay attention. Pay attention to what matters in the long haul. Pay attention to who loves you. Then, pay attention to the good you now offer.

God who gives generously to any who ask.



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