

THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

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Editor ~ Wade Stanley

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Best Foot Forward

Charles Fry

A couple of years ago, my oldest brother, Dennis, broke a toe, and he was sent to a podiatrist. This business is a big, bustling medical facility specializing in treating feet that's been heavily advertised with a memorable jingle. We started with a positive impression. The parking lot and waiting room were full up; business was booming. The podiatrist who saw Dennis that day and later again to monitor the injury mentioned that we could bring Dennis back every six weeks to have his toenails trimmed. That's not a popular chore, so we were glad to set it up. Subsequent visits persistently had really long wait times for short appointments, often an hour or more in the waiting room. Obviously the facility was very busy, so I wondered if our timing was bad, with appointments always on a Friday morning. I asked a receptionist if a different day might work better, and she wasn't very assuring but told me we could try a Monday next time, so we did. The wait time was just as bad and I was questioning whether it was really worth it, and generally was developing a bad attitude toward this particular medical facility. Perhaps they had an undeserved positive reputation or had gotten too big and lost their drive. But then, we were arriving for an appointment one Monday morning, and I saw the podiatrist who treated Dennis arriving at about the same time. It dawned on me when I saw him arriving at work that the real problem probably wasn't the podiatry business; it was the individual Dennis was assigned to for treatment. I surmised he had some unfortunate personal issues that resulted in him being careless and late and just not doing a good job. He had training and ability but wasn't wholly on board with his job. I had been blaming the business and facility for this fellow's problems. He made them look bad. Lots of other workers in that facility were doing a good job, but the patients seeing this particular guy were getting poor treatment. Not too long after that we learned that this podiatrist was no longer in Dennis's insurance plan, and he'd be seeing a different doctor. The next appointment was prompt, the attention given to Dennis was courteously professional and attentive, and we came away with a whole different feeling about the place. A subsequent appointment was similarly pleasant and efficient.

Those two podiatrists, he and she, each in turn were the face

of that business for us and substantially determined how we would view the whole establishment. He made the place look slow and uncaring; she helped it appear efficient and concerned. Overall, she, most likely, is giving a more accurate picture of a business that otherwise has all the signs of success in what they do in service for lots of patients. She helps them look good by doing well.

Christians everyday and everywhere are representing Jesus Christ and his church, for good or ill. People are getting some notion of who Jesus is and what his church is, moment by moment, word by word, deed by deed, encounter after encounter, from people called Christians. Unbelievers'

What people see in the everyday behavior of Christians — right or wrong, good or bad, submissive or assertive, humble or proud, patient and forgiving, or anxious and upset — affects their perception of the Lord, the gospel, and the church.

thoughts about Jesus and his church depend enormously on what they think about you and me if they know the least bit about our faith. With that in mind, Jesus repeatedly instructed his disciples to do good works and shine the light of glory on God and to bear desirable and attractive good fruit in his name. Luke in Acts extolled the love, kindness, and generosity of the believers in the first generations of the church. Paul, in his letters, repeatedly taught Christians to hold on to what is good and overcome evil with good (e.g., **Romans 12:9, 21**). Persistence in good works is required of church leaders and those supported by the church (e.g., **Titus 1:8, 2:7, 1 Timothy 5:10**).

One of the multitude of reasons for always doing good in

continued on the next page...

word and deed is to make the Lord's message attractive. That's a motivation Paul described in instructions for bondservants, or slaves.

Bondservants are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior (Titus 2:9-10, ESV).

Christian behavior, even in difficult circumstances, is intended to make the teaching about God attractive. We are supposed to dress it up by doing good all the time. What people see in the everyday behavior of Christians — right or wrong, good or bad, submissive or assertive, humble or proud, patient and forgiving, or anxious and upset — affects their perception of the Lord, the gospel, and the church. This isn't the only reason for always doing what pleases the Lord, even when it's hard or costly, but it's an important one. Peter wrote about tough times for Christians as aliens in the culture, unwelcome and vilified. In his letter, he repeatedly stressed the requirement that Christians not respond in kind to hostility but always live obviously good lives demonstrated in good deeds.

- **1 Peter 2:12**, *"Keep your conduct among the nations honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good works and glorify God on the day of visitation."*
- **1 Peter 2:15**, *"For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people."*

In the Lord's kingdom, there is no substitute for doing good and no option for joining the crowd in doing wrong. It isn't acceptable to go with the crowd; it's necessary to be like the Savior himself. The way to make Jesus look good is to be like Jesus because he is good and calls us to be like himself, in the strength of his Spirit.

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Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment

Blake Stanley

In **Matthew 5:7**, Christ said that it is the merciful who shall obtain mercy. **James 2:13** states the same truth:

"For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment."

The spirit of this beatitude and the passage in James is seen

in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in **Matthew 18**. In that parable, a king is trying to settle an account of a servant who owed him an unfathomable debt. The servant begs to be released from his debt. The king has mercy on the man and forgives the debt. The forgiven servant then turns around and deals harshly with one who was unable to repay a much smaller debt owed to him. The parable ends with the unforgiving servant being chastised and imprisoned by the king.

Through these passages, it is clear the Lord expects His people to be merciful. He even goes so far as to withhold His own mercy from those who are unmerciful. It is the merciful who will obtain mercy, and judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. The servant of the king experienced this. Mercy was extended to him until he refused to extend mercy to another.

As Christians, how do we show mercy to others? The parable in **Matthew 18** provides one example. This parable was prompted by a question asked by Peter: *"Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (verse 21)*. While the object of forgiveness in the parable is money, Christ's point wasn't about money. Christ illustrated the depth of mercy we should have towards our brethren for wrongs committed against us. This could be a hurtful action, an unkind statement, a poorly handled situation, or one of the many other ways people hurt and offend one another. These things happen often in any group of people, and the church is not excluded. Jesus' words show that mercy should be extended in those instances instead of taking offense or harboring resentment or hurt. Often, that's not easy. But it is important to remember that just as the king's servant was both lender and debtor, everyone has been both the offended and the offender at some time. And, again, like the servant, we all desire mercy from others towards us. Where we should differ is in extending mercy towards others.

Mercy is also about how we view people. Are we judgmental towards them because of their circumstances, their sin, their socio-economic status, their manner of speaking or dress, their political beliefs, or any of the things we tend to judge people by? Christ warned the Pharisees about such judgments. In **Matthew 23:23**, He tells them they had neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. Their lack of consideration for mercy is seen in **Matthew 9:13** and **Matthew 12:7**. In both passages, the Pharisees are critical of men who were with Jesus. In **Matthew 9**, it was the tax collectors and sinners Christ was dining with. In **Matthew 13**, it was His disciples who were plucking heads of grain to eat while walking through a field on the sabbath. In response, Christ

quotes **Hosea 6:6**, “*I desire mercy and not sacrifice.*”

The Greek word translated “mercy” in these passages (as well as the Hebrew word in **Hosea 6:6**) means steadfast love. This is what the Pharisees were missing. They looked at those sitting with and following Christ with judgment, not love. They looked at their occupation and whatever other characteristics these people had that made them unsavory in their eyes — likely their poverty — and had no love for them. Part of Christ's point to the Pharisees was that these were people they should love, not judge.

James writes about this very same thing in **James 2** where he writes about not giving preferential treatment to wealthy people who come into their congregation compared to what they offer the poor man. James ties this directly into mercy and wraps this section when he says in **verse 13**, quoted above, that mercy triumphs over judgment. Through sin, it has become human nature to judge people: to judge them by their appearance, to view them through the lens of our perception, and to seek judgment and retribution when wronged. But the Lord wants His people to have mercy as we have received mercy. Just as it is the Lord's choice to give mercy to us, and just as we are unworthy of His mercy, we also have to choose mercy over judgment, and our perception of people's worthiness for mercy cannot be part of that decision.

Does this person deserve my help? Does this person deserve my mercy? Do my brothers or sisters deserve me to look past what they've said and the offense they've given? Does this poor person who is in his place because of the choices that he's made deserve my help? Does he deserve of my love? Is this sister who may not be easy to talk to or struggling in her sin deserving of my attention? Those are not the right questions. The question should not be about them but about ourselves. Am I choosing for mercy to triumph over judgment?

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The Hard Stuff

Wade Stanley

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature,

*for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil (**Hebrews 5:12-14**, ESV).*

With the 27th pick in the 2003 NFL draft, the Kansas City Chiefs selected Larry Johnson. The selection led to much head-scratching among the fan base. The Chiefs had one of the best running backs in the league (Priest Holmes) running behind one of the best offensive lines ever assembled. Johnson got his chance to prove himself quickly. With Holmes nursing an injury, Johnson was thrust into early season action. The first two games went poorly and led to an eye-opening press conference the following week. Hall of Fame coach Dick Vermeil famously said of Johnson, “It’s time to take the diapers off.” Though the message was harsh, insulting, and a belittling bit of typical locker-room talk, the meaning could not be missed: “Larry Johnson, it’s time to grow up.”

When the Hebrews writer reaches **5:11**, he tells his readers, “Folks, it’s time to grow up.”

Up to this point in Hebrews, the writer has leaned heavily on passages from the Old Testament to make his case about Jesus Christ. To do this effectively, he depends on our familiarity with the Old Testament stories and prophecies. If we have not taken the time to familiarize ourselves with the Old Testament, we will struggle to understand his argument. Here’s the bottom line: to understand Jesus in His fullness, we must seek to understand what was written before Jesus was born in the Bethlehem manger.

What the writer of Hebrews expects from his readers is not unreasonable. He wants to talk to them about deeper matters, but their ignorance of the Scriptures stands in the way. They have been in the faith long enough to be teachers but need someone else to teach them. They are old enough to eat solid food but still want milk. They should be adults but remain babies in their understanding of the Scriptures. As he says in **verses 10-11**, “You need to know about the connection between Melchizedek and Jesus, but it’s hard to explain, and you don’t really want to listen to what I have to say.” In short, the writer of Hebrews is deeply disappointed with the spiritual immaturity of his readers.

If we want our muscles to grow stronger, we need to exercise them. And exercise by itself is not enough: we gain strength when we consistently add more weight, increase our distance, or push ourselves to a new benchmark. In the same way, we need to push ourselves to learn and grow in our knowledge of the Scriptures. Sticking to the simple things keeps us immature and weak. If we want to be mature and strong, we must tackle the hard stuff.

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Please check your expiration date!

Continued from page 3: "The Hard Stuff"

When a baby grows, he or she reaches a point where milk is insufficient. Babies can nurse their mothers dry and still not be filled up. That's why we introduce solid food — a growing baby demands it! In like manner, the basics of Scripture will nourish us, but they will not help us grow into maturity. We need solid food — we need to tackle the hard stuff — to grow into spiritual adulthood.

And that's why in **6:1**, the writer of **Hebrews** says, "*Therefore, let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity.*" It's time, my friends, to leave behind the basics and dig into the hard stuff.

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Glory to God!

Hope Bywater confessed the name of Jesus and was baptized at **South Fairfax Church of Christ** in **Bakersfield, CA**, December 22, 2024.

Special Meetings

The ladies of the **Linden Avenue, Church of Christ, Long Beach, CA**, have planned a special Ladies' Day for **February 15**. Please join them for a study of the book of Philemon: "Refresh My Soul."

The ladies of the **Smart Road Church of Christ, Greenwood, MO**, have planned a special day on **March 1**. Details can be found by visiting the congregation's website.

The **Section Church of Christ in Osage City, KS**, plans a special weekend meeting for **March 15-16**. Please make plans to join them at 4:00 p.m. on Saturday and 9:30 a.m. on Sunday.

The brethren at the **Summersville Church of Christ, Summersville, MO**, plan a weekend meeting for **April 26-27**. The theme will be baptism.

Additional details for these, and other upcoming meetings, can be found by visiting the Gospel Message website. You can use the QR code to the right to navigate to the relevant page.



2025

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