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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

By Ron Allen

The central characters in a British TV sitcom called “Keeping Up Appearances,” are Richard and Hyacinth Bucket. Hyacinth wants very much to be seen and known as woman who belongs with society’s upper crust. Her existence is devoted to this end. She insists that her name be pronounced ‘Boo-kay’, not bucket.

Hyacinth has a sister, Daisy, who is married to Onslow. Daisy has none of the pretensions of her sister. Onslow is blue-collar to the bone, and never dresses in anything else but jeans and an old undershirt with no sleeves. They live in a run-down apartment in a seedy neighborhood.



Hyacinth laments Daisy and Onslow’s lack of appreciation for cultural refinements. The one thing she fears more than all else is to be seen in public with these two relatives of hers; it could only cause embarrassment and spoil her chances of proper recognition.

One fine day Hyacinth’s joy is unbounded. She and Richard have been asked to take Mrs.

Northcott-Stephens with them in their car to the civic reception. This will be an excellent chance for Hyacinth to showcase her social legitimacy.

In due time, they collect Mrs. Northcott-Stephens and begin the drive to the civic reception. All goes to plan until Onslow and Daisy come into view on the roadside. They wave their arms frantically. Their car has broken down—again—and they need a ride into town. Hyacinth tries to fob them off. “Can’t you see we have Mrs. Northcott-Stephens with us? Surely you don’t expect *her* to share the back seat with you.”

“Nonsense,” interrupts Mrs. Northcott-Stephens from the back seat as she pokes Hyacinth’s shoulder with her umbrella. “I don’t mind sharing the back seat at all; get in.” Daisy and Onslow install themselves in the car at once, and the journey continues.

“Just set us down here at the pub,” says Onslow helpfully. Hyacinth rolls her eyes at this. “For goodness sake Onslow, you don’t think the likes of Mrs. Northcott-Stephens wants to be seen anywhere near your pub do you?” Onslow is just beginning to look confused when Mrs. Northcott-Stephens pokes Hyacinth in the back with her umbrella again and says, “Nonsense, of course we can stop at the pub.”

They arrive at the pub. Onslow and Daisy haul themselves from the car. Then, smiling broadly and holding his unshaven face quite close to the window, Onslow addresses Mrs. Northcott-Stephens: “You know you are most welcome, love, to join Daisy and myself for a pint or two in the pub.” Now Hyacinth is dismayed. “Onslow, surely you don’t think Mrs. Northcott-Stephens wished to be in that pub with you!”

“Nonsense,” again, from Mrs. Northcott-Stephens. “I would be delighted to join you for a drink. Whiskey please.” Poor Hyacinth. She is at a loss. “Richard and I will wait for you outside; won’t we Richard? You won’t take long, of course.”

But she does take a long time. So long in fact, that Hyacinth sends Richard in to find her important guest. The episode ends with vision of Onslow and Daisy sitting at the bar with their new-found friend, while an apoplectic Hyacinth peers through the window and grapples with the concept of a rampant Mrs. Northcott-Stephens, so at home in coarse and uncivilized company. Hyacinth thought she knew Mrs. Northcott-Stephens, but she obviously did not!

Compartmentalization is a sad feature of human life. The powerful and reputable arrange themselves at the top; hands on the levers of society. The rest take their place somewhere below, where they are obliged to accept whatever is foisted upon them; to receive what is left over, be ignored, treated with disdain, wished out of sight and blamed for their unsavory appearance. Only those who have been obliged to live on the fringes of any system, circle, league or fraternity—any human grouping—can truly relish the delicious irony in Hyacinth Bucket’s pub dilemma. They discover a degree of humor in it that escapes those who move in ‘higher circles.’

The book of Acts traces the gospel from its beginnings in Jerusalem, all the way to Rome, the capital of Empire. It documents the church’s break from Jewish moorings as Jesus begins to draw disciples to him from among those with little previous connection to Judaism. Many Christian Jews view this trend with alarm, and they resist it vigorously. Yet, again



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Continued on the next page

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

"All of you share in God's grace with me" (Philippians 1:7).

More than at any other time in history, it is physically easier for humans to be in contact with each other. Travel is cheaper and faster; there is more disposable income, ever-multiplying miracles are wrought by digital technologies making social networking immediate and constant. Yet, despite these marvels, a corresponding enhancement of community spirit and fellow-feeling has not come to pass. Our need to feel thoroughly connected to others has gone begging. One Hollywood actor said it well: *"We are all in this together, alone."*

The gospel addresses the problem of loneliness. From his initial visit to Philippi, the church there had come to share in Paul's great passion—the message of Jesus Christ. *"I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:5).*

Partnership (*fellowship*) means more in Scripture than it does elsewhere. It denotes a share in something incalculably bigger than any of the partakers. So much bigger that the *whole* is not divided among the sharers in a way that enables each to have a *part*. Instead, each enjoys the whole. Paul and his Philippian friends have become partners, then, in the divine movement known as the gospel. The gospel is God's doing, and they have been taken up into it as sharers in the immensity of its blessings and responsibilities.


We know from the Philippian letter and from Acts, who some of Paul's partners were. They included Lydia the Thyatiran seller of purple textiles. She was a Gentile convert to Judaism and was Paul's first convert to Jesus Christ. Many from her household, which may have included

a mix of Jewish and Gentile folk, were baptized along with her.

There was a slave-girl, delivered from demon possession through Paul's ministry. The Roman jailer and his family who were all baptized on the night of the earthquake; they were among the partners. Others included Epaphroditus the messenger (Philippians 2). Euodia and Syntyche, two disagreeable women (Philippians 4:2).

The church at Philippi was an eclectic mix of sexes, nationalities, races, classes and personality types. Time and again Paul refers to them as 'brothers', a term that clearly takes in the women. Four times in the first eight verses of chapter four he uses the phrase, 'all of you.' In 4:3, he collects them under the description: *"whose names are in the book of life."* And the very first sentence of the entire letter has: *"all the saints in Christ Jesus."*

It is this disparate cluster of individuals to whom Paul speaks when he says: *"all of you share in God's grace with me."* Who are the people, that share in God's grace with me? With you? Whoever they might be, they have as much of God's grace as we do. No matter where a person lives or what corner of the church he occupies, he is part of a vast communion through whom and in whom God is working. God is working in 'others' as surely as he works in me.

The gospel task has not been left for me, or for us, to carry out alone. We are part of a broad army of brothers and sisters whose names are written in the book of life. 

Continued from previous page

and again, those who oppose the universal outlook of the gospel find themselves up against God.

The God who raised Jesus from the dead gives no sign that he is uncomfortable with nations outside of Israel. In fact, he appears to relish their company. The first stewards of Christ's message, who had been brought up under the tutelage of Moses' law—who thought they knew God well enough to judge who he would choose to fellowship with—are repeatedly surprised, bewildered, and even offended by God's action.

In Acts 26, Paul is brought to trial in the court of Festus and Agrippa. He tries to explain to these Gentile kings why his own countrymen are so eager to kill him. During the two years of incarceration prior to this court appearance, he has gone out

of his way to identify himself with Israel's religious aspirations. *"I am a Jew, trained in the law of our fathers..." (Acts 22:3). "I believe everything that is written in the law and that is written in the prophets" (Acts 24:14, 15).* Along with his people, Paul had longed for God to fulfill his covenant promise. Because that promise had so long been delayed; because so many Israelites had been killed or died of old age without seeing the promise made good, many had fixed their hope on a resurrection of the hopeful dead. *"I have the same hope as my accusers, in the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 24:15).*

But Paul's point of departure from Jews who wish his death is that he has come to believe that the resurrection on which Israel has pinned its hopes, has happened. God has raised a →

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Editor

Ron Allen

Graphic Designer

Debbie O'Brien

Proofreader

Philip Rhodes

OVERSEAS ADDRESSES:

Australian office:
P.O. Box 6788
Tweed Heads Sth
NSW 2486, Australia

Canadian offices:
P.O. Box 537
Abbotsford, BC V2S 5Z5
Canada

222 Olive Avenue
Willowdale, ON M2N 4P6
Canada

man from the dead. This proves he is God's man. His name is Jesus of Nazareth, the one crucified by Caiaphas and his cronies.

But for the Jews, the very fact of Jesus' crucifixion is proof that he could not be God's Messiah. Who among the Rabbis ever said that Messiah would end in such disgrace? Crucifixion came under the sanction of the law (Deuteronomy 21:23), which brought down God's curse on any person hanged on a tree. Such a convergence of divine cursing assigned to a corpse thus suspended was deemed enough to defile the whole land until it was cut down.

The Romans who turned crucifixion into an art form, used it to terrorize and subdue conquered peoples. Even so, they regarded it with loathing. Cicero (Roman philosopher) said: "Far be the very name of the cross—not only from the body—but even from the thoughts, eyes and ears of Roman citizens." Crucifixion then, was the very abyss of degradation and condemnation for both Jew and Gentile.

When Jesus was impaled on his cross, priest and scribe, teachers of the law who had opposed him, felt vindicated in their unbelief. God would never permit himself to be associated with such scandal, such dishonor, such infamy. He would never allow himself to be smeared by being linked to such discredit. It all went to show how deceived his disciples were. Who but sectarian madmen would believe in a crucified Messiah?

All these arguments had been well understood by Paul. They made perfect sense to him. Fortified with the reasonableness of his theological position, he had been on his way to Damascus to put an end to the Christian movement there.

But, as he neared the city, he was met by the 'charlatan' Himself; the pretender. The crucified One stopped him and spoke to him—and nothing was ever the same again.

If Hyacinth Bucket was thunderstruck to witness Mrs. Northcott-Stephens in a state of high enjoyment, surrounded by a gaggle of low-class persons, think what degrees of astonishment must now have washed over Paul! The changes in him that were the reason for the hatred he now endured, were these:

1. He was convinced that Jesus was alive. He knew that he had been terribly wrong.
2. He began to realize that there was much about God that he did not know. He had been in no doubt as to what kinds of persons Christ would associate with. He thought that God shared his opinions of certain people. He faced the shocking realization that God was one in Spirit with the very people he was trying to exterminate. He saw that God was their friend. They were on intimate terms with the God he was doing his best to impress with his zealous program of persecution. He thought he knew God, but he didn't know him at all.
3. Despite his erstwhile ignorance, Paul found out that God had work for him to do; a specific assignment. Instead of a crusade against a politically incorrect minority group within Judaism, Jesus appointed him to a task embracing Israel and the whole world. Not now an authorization from the Jewish Establishment against a few; now, a divine commissioning for the many. "I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who

are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:17 & 18). Not now breathing threats against the people of the Way, forcing them to blaspheme against this Jesus and turn back to the traditional faith. Rather, calling on Jews and Gentiles to repent and acknowledge the God of Jesus Christ. Not now warning the disciples of Jesus to recant and conform, but a message as apt for Israel as for the nations—repent and find refuge in the great mercy brought by Jesus.

Yes. The same message of grace and mercy for the 'chosen people' as for the not chosen. This is what Paul learned from Jesus. It was *this* gospel that made no distinction between the descendants of Abraham and other peoples that the Jews found so offensive. "That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me" he said (Acts 26:21, 22).

4. Only because he met Jesus in person did Paul learn that Messiah crucified was not an absurdity. Because he met him, he could no longer denounce One whom God had so plainly vindicated. In meeting Jesus, he was faced with the truth that God had arranged for Israel's rejection of the Savior to serve his purposes, not theirs. Whereas Paul had hated the very name of Jesus, now, after personally encountering him, he awoke to the realization that he was loved by him.

He whom Paul had maligned, whose disciples he had cursed and hurt, spoke to him with loving concern. Remembering the terrible sufferings served on Jesus, which Paul had thought were well enough deserved; he saw now that all that pain had been in his interest. He understood that he had been fighting against love. While he had been angrily persecuting Christians, Christ was in merciful pursuit of the persecutor.

5. By coming face to face with Jesus and learning from him, Paul saw that Messiah had not come to heap kudos on stewards of Messianic hope. Rather, to shine his light into a darkness inhabited both by Israel that hoped, and Gentiles who had no hope. Both 'children' and the 'dogs looking for




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crumbs under the table' were perishing for lack of bread. Those 'being led' along with those 'leading' were both blind and bound for the ditch.

Because he was met by Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul learned that Christ was *bound* to suffer, and as the first to rise from the dead, "proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles" (Acts 26:23).

As the One who God acknowledges as his Son by raising him from the dead, Jesus is the 'chief witness', the preeminent gospel preacher. So vast and plenteous in grace is Jesus, that all supposed distinctions between Jew and Gentile are swept into irrelevance.

The 'at-home-ness' of Jesus in the company of outsiders—Paul caught it! Only Jesus can deliver good men and women from a religious world view which deludes them into thinking they know who is and who is not fit company for God. It was a revelation when Hyacinth Bucket found out who Mrs. Northcott-Stephens enjoyed being with. We ought to let Jesus himself demonstrate to us who he delights in; who he loves, then join him in his associations. 

IDENTIFICATION

By Bishop Fulton Sheen

How often in helping others do we remain outside of their needs and pains, rarely identifying ourselves with them. One feels this particularly in visiting a leper colony where one mingles with, and touches the, the victims of this disease. But after a few brief hours, one leaves only to feel the contrast with those who stay and who spend their lives among the open wounds.

This want of identification is also experienced by the honest-minded social workers who relieve the want of others with other people's money, who spend the eight hours of working time in broken homes with unfed children, and then leave them to their need, as one might leave a factory when the whistle blew.

Many there are in the world who personally bear the burden of others. They are missionaries. What a contrast between foreign aid and missionary aid! Foreign aid brings *things* such as tractors, money, drills; missionaries bring themselves. Foreign aid bears the financial burden of assisting others; missionaries bear the persons on their backs. Foreign aid relieves poverty; the missionary helps the poor. Foreign aid attacks the problem of ignorance; the missionary struggles with this ignorant boy or dull girl. When the job is finished, the representative of foreign aid leaves the distressed area; the missionary stays. The former lives in a hotel; the missionary shares the lot of those whom he serves.

The world has in it countless examples of those who put on, not the cloak of the poor man, but rather his poverty. But whence comes the inspiration for this humbling of the seemingly superior self in order to become one with the needy. The question reaches its acute form in a nun in a leper colony. A visitor said to her as she was washing the feet of a leper: "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars!" "Neither would I," she answered. She did it because our blessed Lord looked not upon his Divine Glory and his equality with the Father, but rather looked upon the helplessness and the danger and need of a Savior of men. The lesson of all humiliation for the sake of others comes from God humbling himself, and taking upon himself the form of a man, not just merely helping him in the effects of sin, but in removing sin itself. He crossed a line into that area where afflicted humanity lives and never came back until he relieved the cause of that affliction. This is the foundation of all identification with the poor and the needy. Just as hatred separates man from man, so love produces the harmony of feeling and interest that leads to unity of service, and when this love is divine, then man has an inspiration for doing more than throwing scraps of food to the needy. He throws even himself.

-Fulton Sheen: THE POWER OF LOVE, pp. 59-61. 



DEEP GRATITUDE

Every parable of mercy in the gospel was addressed by Jesus to his opponents: murmuring scribes, grumbling Pharisees, critical theologians, members of the Sanhedrin. They are the enemies of the gospel of grace, indignant because Jesus asserts that God cares about sinners, incensed that he should eat with people they despised. What does he tell them?

These sinners, these people you despise are nearer to God than you. It is not the hookers and thieves who find it most difficult to repent: it is you who are so secure in your piety and pretense that you have no need of conversion.

They may have disobeyed God's call, their professions have debased them, but they have shown sorrow and repentance. But more than any of that, these are the people who appreciate his goodness: they are parading into the kingdom before you, for they have what you lack—a deep gratitude for God's love and deep wonder at his mercy.

Let us ask God for the gift he gave to an unforgettable Rabbi, Joshua Abraham Heschel: "*Dear Lord, grant me the grace of wonder. Surprise me, amaze me, awe me in every crevice of your universe. Delight me to see how your Christ plays in ten thousand places. Lovely in limbs, lovely in eyes not his, to the father through the features of men's faces. Each day enrapture me with your marvellous things without number. I do not ask to see the reason for it all; I ask only to share the wonder of it all.*"

-Brennan Manning: THE RAGAMUFFIN GOSPEL, pp. 99, 100. 



LETTING GO OF DIVISIONS

By Henri M. Nouwen

I realize that there are still many people with whom I am not fully at peace. When I think back on the friendships, encounters, and confrontations of the past, I realize that islands of anger, bitterness, and resentment still lie hidden in my heart. And when I bring to mind all whom I personally know or about whom I have heard or read, I know how I divide them between those who are for me and those who are against me, those whom I like and those whom I do not like, those whom I want to be with, and those whom I try to avoid at all costs. My inner life is so filled with opinions, judgments and prejudices about my 'brothers and sisters' that real peace is still far away.

As I think about Jesus' words I know I must let go of all these divisive emotions and thoughts so I can truly experience peace with all of God's people. This means an unrestrained willingness to forgive and let go of old fears, bitterness, resentment, anger and lust, and thus find reconciliation.

In this way I can be a real peacemaker. My inner peace can be a source of peace for all I meet. I can then offer gifts on the altar of God as a testimony to this peace with my brothers and sisters. I have to start thinking of concrete ways to make peace with my brothers and sisters who have something against me. What do I have to lose? To make peace is to free myself from my easy judgments so that I can love my enemy and the God who holds me and my enemies together in the palm of his hand.

-Henri M. Nouwen: THE ROAD TO DAYBREAK, pp. 141, 142. 