

## Beyond Mere Civility



Monte Wolverton

**Y**es, sir, my buddy answered his father. I was about 15 years old and this was not how my Pacific Northwest friends normally talked to anyone. But Caleb (not his real name) was from Louisiana. His affable southern quips and gentle drawl made him fun to be around. Not that he wasn't into wayward teen activities—just that he'd been culturally conditioned to be genteel and civil when it was in his best interest. My other friends and I were a rather uncivil lot (insolent comebacks and raunchiness are teen survival skills), but I still respected my parents, and I thought maybe Caleb was onto something I could adopt. Beyond that, “Sir” and “Ma’am” had a rigorous charm. I might even score an increase in allowance!

I was wrong. After a couple of days of “yes sir” and “yes ma’am,” my dad sternly demanded: “What’s going on here? Why are you talking like that?” Sure, he

appreciated respect, but he valued authenticity over formal politeness. He didn't trust pretense. This was family, not military. And my dad was well acquainted with the two-faced teen character Eddie Haskell (from the 1960s TV sitcom *Leave It to Beaver*)—obsequiously polite to adults but otherwise a rogue. My dad's concluding thought was, “You don't need to call me ‘sir.’ Just do the right things.”

He understood that civil words and affectations were not necessarily an indication of good character, intent or behavior.

But now, 60 years later, it seems like even civil words have been tossed out the window. Now, boorishness can catapult you to the top! Now, we idolize people who come right out and “speak their minds” without tact, diplomacy, empathy or mercy. Now, civility and politeness have become weakness. Should we be alarmed? Is this brash and rude behavior the

final disintegration of society as we know it?

Western culture, if not the entire world, is undergoing a sea change. Hostile polarization bulldozes dialog and tolerance out of the way. We have trouble dealing with ambiguity or shades of grey. Extreme has become mainstream. Many of us have cast aside goodwill, compassion and empathy. Worse yet, this new incivility is contagious, especially when modeled by leaders.

Experts debate several possible reasons for our decline:

- General stress and unrest.
- Anger in reaction to abuse of power by authorities and institutions.
- Deep-seated racial, gender, religious and class prejudices.
- A sense of unreasonable entitlement.
- Media sensationalism and overemphasis on scandal.
- Tribalized and polarized information sources.
- Leaders and celebrities who promote hostility and anger.

But when in human history have these factors not existed?

### Just What Do You Mean: Civility?

Author of the book *The Soul of Civility*, Alexandra Hudson maintains that civility and politeness are different. “Politeness is manners, etiquette, and technique—it's a type of behavior—whereas *civility is a virtue far deeper and richer than mere*



# Christ Is Our Encouragement

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19).*

**F**rom the first words spoken at the beginning of his earthly ministry, Jesus gave those listening to him direct and unmistakable **encouragement**. Jesus boldly announced that he had been sent to give good news, freedom, recovery of sight, the end of oppression and divine favor to those who needed **encouragement** the most. The poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed would be the recipients of such loving grace. We, as listeners to his words today, and also as people who share the same needs, rejoice in these gifts of his loving favor. We give thanks for his gifts of direct and unmistakable **encouragement**.

Jesus knew well the difficulties of living life in the Roman world. Poverty and hardship in a state of subjugation to a foreign power burdened the lives of the people. Imprisonment, conscription into the army and harsh taxation left many as mere captives. Life in the Roman world was hard living. The people of Jesus' day needed deliverance. They needed direct and unmistakable **encouragement**.

The people listening to Jesus that day were looking for a physical deliverance. They were looking for the type of encouragement that would come as a result of freedom from all forms of physical oppression. Although Jesus did

indeed heal the blind, raise the sick and the dead, as well as set many free from all kinds of captivity, his favor would look quite different than what most were expecting. His direct, unmistakable encouragement would be limitless by comparison. Jesus brought spiritual encouragement to those who would receive it.

*In this godless world you will continue to experience difficulties. But take heart! I've conquered the world (John 16:33, The Message).*

**As Christ-followers, we have made our home in Christ Jesus, and he in us. We live in his spiritual freedom... We are no longer imprisoned, captive or oppressed, but alive in him.**

The life Jesus lived was a paradox to the people. His death on the cross looked to most like nothing but discouragement. *Where was the physical deliverance so many were hoping for? Where was the direct and unmistakable encouragement that would come from freedom and the end of oppression?* There seemed to be no good news from Jesus' death.

In this physical life, we can often ask similar questions. Life in our modern world can be nothing but hard living, as well. Runaway inflation, high taxation and interest rates on credit card debt can leave us feeling like financial captives.

As we age, physical limitations, ailments and prolonged illnesses can come with a burdensome weight of oppression and a desperation for God's physical healing. We can live imprisoned by strained relationships with family

or friends, or by the utter realities of loneliness. We cry out for good news and favor from life all around us and feel like we receive none.

Yet, we are reminded that Jesus conquered the world. We are given the **encouragement** to **take heart!** We are not alone, though we may feel so. We are not without good news, favor and spiritual freedom though we can't see it. Jesus has given us the victory! Jesus reminds us of his ever-faithful indwelling presence. He is always right here.

*I'll be with you...day after day after day, right up to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20, The Message).*

As Christ-followers, we have made our home in Christ Jesus, and he in us. We live in his spiritual freedom, by his spiritual sight. His good news of salvation for all who will believe, take up their cross and follow him, is our **encouragement**. We remember that he lives in us, day after day. He will never leave nor forsake us.

From the beginning of his earthly ministry to the end of our physical lives—for all eternity we belong to him. We give thanks and rejoice in his **spiritual encouragement**. Though the age in which we live may look godless to us, we remain in his favor and grace. We rest in his victory.

Though we may feel imprisoned, oppressed or outside of his divine favor, he gives us the spiritual sight to remember the truth. We are his, no longer poor, but spiritually rich. We are his, no longer imprisoned, captive or oppressed, but alive in him. **Christ Jesus is our direct, unmistakable encouragement, each day of our lives.** □

—Ed Dunn

conduct. Instead of focusing on the form of conduct, civility gets to the motivation of any given action.” While this is insightful, motive and practice are always linked.

To get a better handle on civility, consider incivility, which includes things like:

- Rude, crude, violent language.
- Insults, threats and humiliation.
- Violation of personal space.
- Bullying and snubbing.
- Vandalism and hooliganism.

Does incivility injure? Yes it does, and stunningly so. Sociologist Christine Porath, author of *Mastering Civility: A Manifesto for the Workplace*, researched the psychological effects of incivility. She observes, “When you’re exposed to hostility or aggression, you behave differently. *Incivility sneaks into your subconscious*. It’s easy to see how plagues of incivility can take shape and spread.” In repeated studies, she found that when people were exposed to an act of incivility:

- Cognition decreased by 30%.
- Nearly 50% of people decreased their work effort.
- 80% of people lost work time worrying about the incident.

*Incivility is not a victimless crime*. When we behave or speak uncivilly we hurt people, families, institutions and society.

## How Did We Get Civility?

Somewhere in the dim mists of ages past, powerful rulers learned the last thing a king needed was infighting and warring factions. Instead, rulers needed their officials to work together agreeably to keep order, dispense justice, settle disputes and build commerce and wealth—to maintain and grow an empire. That required *civility*—which in that day meant standards of conduct between rulers and the subjects who served them.

As time went on, every great civilization prided itself in its own brand of *civility*, which spread from imperial courts into the daily world of business and law. The word



*Everyone, no matter what their current condition belongs to him, and we should never write anyone off—because he does not.*

*courtesy* literally expresses the respectful dignity of courts. **In the Roman empire**, the Latin word *civilis* denoted *society, public life, civic order, good citizenship and orderly behavior*.

To be *civil* was to fulfill the duty of a citizen. Yet these same proudly civil Romans built their empire on violence, slavery and crucifixion. Despite their ingenuity, organization and civility, they were one of the most murderous and barbaric empires in history.

A millennium later, across the Atlantic, **the Aztec culture** prized its civility, with each social interaction governed by strict etiquette. Polite, aristocratic Aztecs did not interrupt—respected the elderly—didn’t mock each other publicly—were careful to use appropriate language—valued humility and emotional control. Civil? To be sure—but this same civilization practiced *human sacrifice*—by some estimates over 250,000 times per year!

**In Britain**, around 450AD, the invading pagan Saxons were considered barbarians by the established Christian Roman-British culture. Later in the 800s, Christianized Saxons became the dominant culture and viewed invading pagan Vikings as uncivil, until Christianized Vikings conquered England in the 11th Century and became the arbiters of civility. By the 1500s, devout British citizens believed their empire was the apex of civility while others were barbarians. Yet the meticulously civil

British used horrific drawing and quartering (also practiced in other countries) to punish anyone who “offended” the crown. And in every royal court, elegant ladies and gentlemen hatched murderous schemes under the camouflage of politeness and civility.

Sadly, **the Christian church** has been no exception for the last two millennia. Not only has it taken political sides and sanctioned violence, inquisitions and pogroms, but has it has split into thousands of hostile factions over elements of doctrine—each side often excommunicating and condemning the other to torture in everlasting hell fire—all the while practicing pious religiosity and sincerely believing they are serving God.

The takeaway is this: *Human civility is a good thing. But even the most purely motivated civility can become a hypocritical veneer to hide the gross barbarity within all of us*. It’s safe to say that to this day, every sophisticated civilization continues to employ some forms of slavery and torture right alongside politeness and civility. *Every ethnicity, every culture, every religion, every human being is both civil and uncivil*. Given the right set of circumstances and enough provocation, the most benign of us can become a rude, violent bully.

## Human Civility—Unstable and Inconsistent

But wasn’t there a golden age, where human civility flourished—where people treated all others with respect

and kindness and never was heard a discouraging word? Let's see...when was that exactly? Maybe King Arthur's court (fictitious). Maybe in the 1950s? Maybe the 1890s? Maybe biblical times? Nope. Not then, not ever. *There is no credible record of any such golden age.*

Civility, incivility and barbarity has always fluctuated and careened over time and culture, for better or worse, driven by social and political forces. Therefore our recent precipitous downward trend should be expected and should cause no great surprise. It's not necessarily the end of the world—not even a confirmation of the “end times”—it's just a continuation of the same old stuff.

*What is different now* is that the stakes are far higher. A barbarian wielding an axe is dangerous, but not nearly so much as a barbarian wielding a thermonuclear weapon.

What can we do? We urgently need a plan of action. But to summarize the last several paragraphs—incivility is part of our nature. So practicing a list of steps to achieve the virtue of civility, when we are the way we are, will not work. *What will work is the complete inversion of perspective we call “The Gospel.”*

## The Way Forward

You won't find the word *civility* in Scripture, but you'll find plenty of

examples of treating each other with love. As part of his description of love in action, Paul tells us to *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse,”* and *“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone”* (Romans 12:14,18).

And then there's what we call the Golden Rule: *“So in everything, do to others, what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the law and the prophets”* (Matthew 7:12). This powerfully compact statement, part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, is such a universal truth that variations of it are found in teachings of Hillel, Philo of Alexandria, Confucius, Muhammad, Buddha, Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates and Seneca. Jesus teaches that *everyone, no matter what their current condition, belongs to him,* and that we should never write anyone off—because he does not.

Ironically this “rule” can't be obeyed by human effort alone. In fact, the Apostle Paul points out in Galatians 5:22-23 that when we treat others with *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control,”* it's the fruit of the Holy Spirit living in us.

With human civility, if someone crosses a line in their incivility to you, then it's expected that you may reciprocate with equal

incivility. This is how feuds and wars happen. But Jesus teaches us (and the Holy Spirit leads us) not to reciprocate—but to *“answer evil with good”* (Matthew 5:38-42).

But wait—careful readers of the Gospels can't help but notice that Jesus himself never shrank from passionately telling people what they needed to hear. Didn't he drive profiteers out of the Temple? Didn't he have harsh words for the religious establishment? Yes, he did—and he never backed down from speaking the plain truth. And since Jesus was *“tempted in every way, just as we are”* (Hebrews 4:15), we may expect that his initial human impulse at times may have been to lash out with uncivil words. Yet he did not—and he stayed on message.

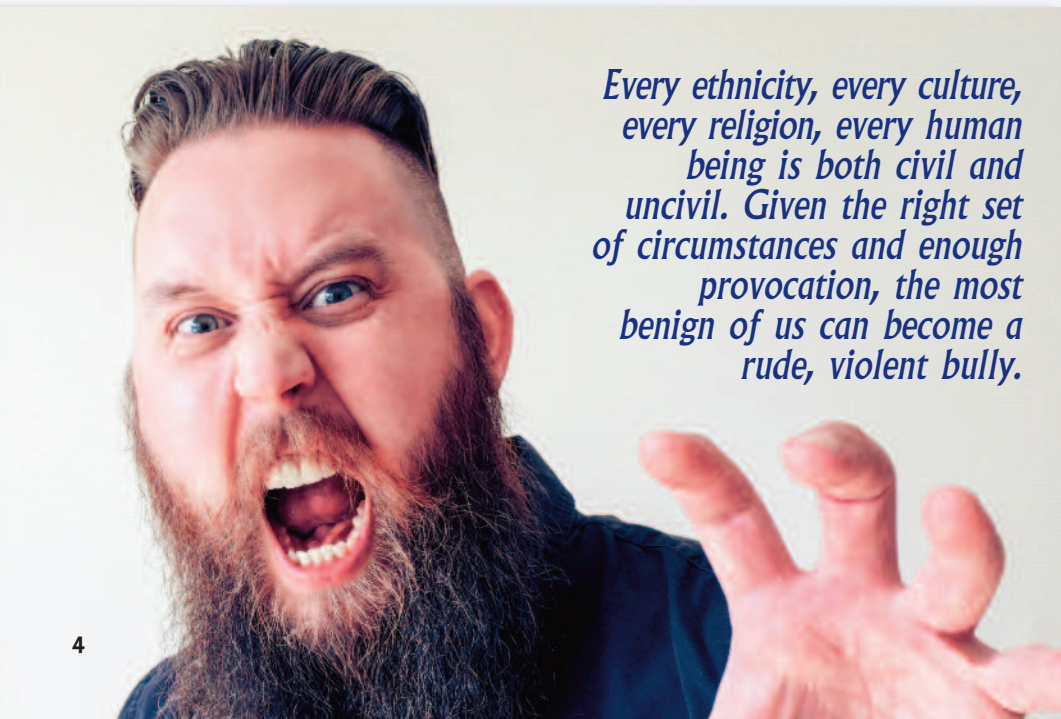
Further, we may also notice that Jesus (despite the dourly pious manner that some institutional religion imputes to him) often gave rebukes with a good dose of trenchant humor and irony (as in Matthew 23:13-37) that his words might pierce human defenses. Where we might use verbal abuse, he uses straightforward language of reason, empathy, love and compassion.

## What About Incivility?

So what can we do about incivility? We can complain, we can holler at everyone to be more civil, we can chalk it up to the impending end of the world and try to scare incivility out of everyone. But none of this will make any enduring difference.

Or—we can merely follow the Jesus Way, which leads infinitely beyond mere civility. By following that Way, we transcend the hypocrisy of human civility and the horror and chaos of human incivility. Whether we agree or disagree with our friends or enemies, we will live at peace. We will be—*merely like Jesus!* □

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*Every ethnicity, every culture, every religion, every human being is both civil and uncivil. Given the right set of circumstances and enough provocation, the most benign of us can become a rude, violent bully.*

# Free in Christ



Greg Albrecht

*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery... You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' If you bite and devour one another, watch out or you will be destroyed by one another... But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law (Galatians 5:1, 13-15, 18).*

**I**n the days leading up to Canada Day on July 1st, and during the same period of time, leading up to Independence Day in the United States on July 4th, North American airwaves along with print and digital media are filled with talk of freedom. It's the time of the year when politicians and government officials throw the word "freedom" around like confetti at a wedding. Talk of freedom is everywhere... but what does freedom mean?

While physical freedom from political tyranny is wonderful, and we must never take it for granted, as Christ-followers we know spiritual freedom to be the greatest freedom and the most incredible miracle, leading us to be thankful for the greatest freedom—freedom in Christ. *What does it mean to be free in Christ?*

## Freedom From and Freedom For

Those who are enslaved by Christless religion (or any Christless "ism" or

ideology) dismiss and devalue freedom in Christ, given by the grace of God, as producing permissiveness and immorality. *Blasphemously suggesting that freedom in Christ leads one to live a life of self-centered indulgence is the last bastion of those who know little, or nothing at all about the beauty and reality of God's grace.*

However, Christians who are free in Christ do not live just as they please, following after every whim of permissiveness, indulging all their senses and gratifying the lusts of the flesh. Jesus Christ, their risen Lord, lives within them producing the fruit of the Holy Spirit (described later in this chapter of Galatians).

Christians who are free in Christ follow the perfect law that gives freedom—they obey Jesus, who, because he lives in them, produces obedience within them. They are free *from* all anti-Christ religion and political tyranny *for* their obedience to Jesus Christ. We read about the perfect law of freedom in the first and second chapter of James, the law of liberty that ironically is given to those who obey... but their obedience is to Jesus, not religions or political systems. Thus, freedom in Christ, from religious bondage, is given for the high calling of following Jesus Christ.

*But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law (Galatians 5:18).*

"Under law" refers to the bondage and spiritual slavery that insists human beings may please and

appease God by virtue of being "under law."

Slaves of Christless religion are "under law" and endlessly toil and labor. Recalling lyrics from that old gospel song *Old Man River*—"toting that barge, lifting that bale"—those "under law" endure spiritual struggles assuming that God will one day be pleased and appeased enough to grant them blessings and "freedom."

## Freedom in Prisons and Cemeteries

Apart from the obvious pitfalls of the pseudo-freedom offered by political viewpoints, many others are deceived into thinking if they carefully follow and obey the laws of their religion, with all of its requirements, ceremonies and rituals, then they will be free—and they believe they will remain free as long as they do and do and do. In essence, people in religious bondage actually believe they are free, and that they will remain free (in their religious penitentiary) as long as they keep doing what their taskmasters order and inflict on them.

I am reminded of a story—a Christ-follower who absolutely believed in the grace of God realized the obvious flaws in legalistic religion and had been delivered from his bondage. His good friend who happened to be a pastor decided that such a belief must be eradicated before it spread and grew (perhaps like a mustard tree—like the gospel itself?!). The pastor defined faith in terms of laws that needed to

be obeyed and behaviors that must be avoided.

The Christ-follower said to the pastor, "Would you like to live in a town where no cigarettes or cigars could be smoked and where all forms of alcohol were against the law? And would you like to live in a town where church attendance on Sundays was required?"

The pastor who was in bondage to legalism took the bait. "You bet. It would be a virtual paradise to live in a community where everyone was required to attend church every Sunday and where no one could ever touch a drop of alcohol and where everyone was forbidden to smoke tobacco."

Then the Christ-follower who wholeheartedly embraced God's grace said to the pastor who defined Christianity by how rigidly and rigorously one obeys religious law, "so... just to get this right ... are you saying if everyone in this paradise-like town was forced to do the right things, as you perceive them, and not allowed to engage in bad behavior, as you define it, then everyone in that community would be a Christian—right?"

The pastor then swallowed the bait—hook, line and sinker: "Yes,

if everyone lived like that in such a community then the entire village or town would be a Christian."

With all of that said, the Christ-follower summarized the logical position that the pastor was advocating:

"Well, if you want a perfect Christian community on earth right now I suggest **two places**. A prison is the *first place*.

In prisons the guards and wardens do their best to regulate and restrict the behavior of prisoners. It seems to me, by your standards and measuring sticks of Christianity, if someone could just enforce all of your rules in a prison, then everyone in the prison would be a Christian. But, as we all know, prisons, in spite of all those controls and laws, are still filled with sin.

So...

*The second and BEST place* where we can find a perfect Christian community, at least by your definition, is the cemetery. No one in the cemetery is breaking any rules—they are all perfectly obedient... they are dead, but apparently, according to your logic, good Christians."

### **Nothing to Hide, Lose or Fear**

Christ-followers are free in Christ and are given three supreme blessings: 1) we have nothing to

hide, 2) we have nothing to lose and 3) we have nothing to fear.

People who are trapped, seduced, brainwashed, deceived and enslaved by Christless religion and anti-Christ political philosophies have *everything to hide*—they must forever pretend to be something they are not.

It's hard to go through life worried that someday someone will discover one of your dirty little secrets. Freedom in Christ is knowing that all is forgiven and that we, as Christ-followers, have *nothing to hide*.

People who are in spiritual bondage feel as if they have *everything to lose*—if they fail to measure up to religious standards they are convinced they will burn forever, tormented eternally in a hell fire that religion has invented to keep them in line.

Those in bondage to Christless thinking and philosophies worry about losing the status they have earned and that they deserve—but their status is like a mirage in the desert. People in bondage to Christless religion live in a state of constant agitation, stress and anxiety—they live with shame and guilt, all induced and caused by Christless religion.

But as the lyrics of an old song propose, "*Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose.*" Freedom in Christ is knowing that we are spiritually free and *have nothing to lose*.

Those in bondage to Christless religion have *everything to fear* from the fabricated god of religion who is filled with recrimination and condemnation, having replaced the one true God of grace, mercy and love.

Freedom in Christ is knowing the one true God and knowing that he is completely misrepresented by Christless religion and that, in Christ, by the grace of God, we have gained freedom in Christ and thus have *nothing to fear*.

Being free in Christ means we have *nothing to hide, nothing to lose and nothing to fear*. □

*Freedom in Christ is knowing the one true God and knowing that he is completely misrepresented by Christless religion...  
Being free in Christ means we have nothing to hide,  
nothing to lose and nothing to fear.*





## Heaven—More Than a Memory

*Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).*

**S**omewhere beyond the blue there's a mansion for me. Those lyrics, sung at vacation Bible school, rang through my consciousness as a child. I was at times almost obsessed with heaven, looking up into the blue sky and imagining that, beyond the puffy cumulous clouds, there were heavenly mansions.

Heaven is not so real to me now as it was then. I am a spatial person; I hover over maps and amateur astronomical charts. I want to know where things are. Where, I ask, amid the millions of light years of space is the geography of heaven? There almost seems to be no real estate to be had for such a paradise—a tropical terrain of rivers and rain forests and meadows and mansions.

Many centuries ago, before the scientific revolution, heaven was just outside the dome covering the earthly terrain. But as the galaxies have grown in numbers and size, the location of heaven has interestingly moved closer to home. The earth itself, many argue, will one day be restored to its primal perfection, and heaven will be right here on the third rock from the sun.

It is difficult for me to situate the whole of heaven here on earth. Will lightning strikes and hurricanes simply stop? Will perpetual sunshine compete with rain to nourish weed-free flower gardens? I cannot wrap my mind around such concepts. Theological constructs do not help, nor do ninety minutes of someone's post-operative experience—or hallucination, whatever the case may be.

For me, heaven is at least partly memory—even as is hell. Where exactly Adolf Hitler is at this very moment is beyond my understanding, apart from the fact that his decayed body and bones lie somewhere in Europe. There is no doubt, however, that Hitler is in hell—at least in the collective memory of most people who have ever heard

of him, there with Stalin, other despicable dictators and terrorists, most notably Osama bin Laden.

In the same sense, my mother is surely in heaven. So also, Myra Jean, my husband's second dearly departed wife who was a friend of mine. How often our memories of her surface and find sanctuary in a heavenly realm far beyond our knowing.

She is there and she is here and we will never forget. Our memories in the form of tender mercies surround her in this indefinable heavenly sanctuary.

But heaven for me is more than memory. I go back to my childhood and find heaven in song, particularly in the hymns we sang in the little country church that nourished my faith. *Shall We Gather at the River* was a favorite, as was the last verse of *Amazing Grace*:

*When we've been there ten thousand years,  
bright shining as the sun.*

*We've no less days to sing God's praise than  
when we've first begun.*

Spirituals also speak to the heart and bring the reality of heaven home. *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* carries the believer to heaven on a joy-ride reminiscent of the prophet Elijah.

*There is a Balm in Gilead* also draws from the Old Testament. The balm is to heal the "sin-sick soul"—healed so that "One of these mornings bright and fair, I'm gonna lay down my heavy load." Heaven for the slave was often equated with freedom—freedom on the other shore... of the Ohio River.

My favorite gospel song of heaven is Ralph Stanley's *Going up Home to Live in Green Pastures*. Recently on the *Prairie Home Companion*, Garrison Keillor added some new phrases, one of which truly brings heaven home with tender mercies: *Even the Lord, in shorts and a t-shirt, sits on the shore enjoying the breeze.* □

—Ruth Tucker

Excerpted from Ruth Tucker's new book, *Tender Mercies: 52 Weekly Meditations*, available at our book page, [www.ptm.org/books](http://www.ptm.org/books).



## Quotes & Connections



"The whole country wants civility. Why don't we have it? It doesn't cost anything. No federal funding, no legislation is involved. One answer is the unwillingness to restrain oneself. Everybody wants other people to be polite to them, but they want the freedom of not having to be polite to others."—"Miss Manners" (Judith Martin)

"If the message a preacher planned to deliver was truly based on God's grace, then instead of handing out weekly bulletins, the ushers would be handing out life jackets and crash helmets." —Annie Dillard

"All great revolutions in men's lives are made in thought. When a change takes place in someone's thought, action follows the direction of the thought as a ship follows the direction of a rudder."—Leo Tolstoy

"If we pledge allegiance to Jesus, we will stand up for the rights, privileges and humanity of others—even those who are not like us at all. And because we are free in Christ, we will not allow others to bully us down the slippery path of political or religious conformity—even under banners of one-sided 'freedom' or 'tolerance.' Our spiritual pledge of allegiance follows Peter's response to religious authorities, 'We must obey God rather than men!' (Acts 5:29)." —Greg Albrecht

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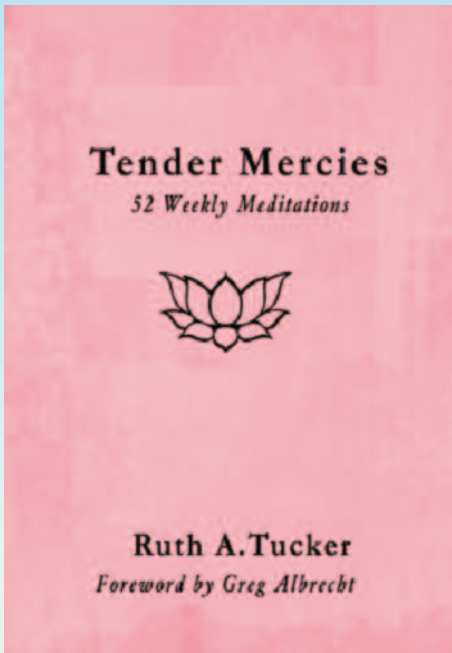
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