

From This Point Forward...

Several years ago, one of our kids had an evening basketball game at their elementary school. It was the end of their recreational basketball league season, and all the championship games for the youngest age groups were held on this one evening.

We arrived at the gym -- which was filled to near capacity with many proud parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and neighbors. We found some seats about mid-way up in the middle section right in front of my parents. We wedged ourselves into our seats -- we were all closely packed together in the noisy gym -- there was electricity in the air!

Our kid's game was not for another 30 minutes or so. As we took our seats, we spoke to some of our friends sitting near us. We turned around and talked to my parents about the goings-on of the day. Everything seemed normal, but after a few minutes -- right in the midst of this tightly packed crowd of people -- I began to smell something. This was not your everyday slightly bad odor -- it was something more. It was pungent. It was like baby's dirty diaper, in triplicate, forcibly held in your face until tears formed in your eyes. The smell was burning the hairs of my nose and turning my stomach. "I don't know how much longer I can take this," I thought to myself. "What is this horrific smell?"

Suddenly it occurred to me, "I bet this is my dad. He has been outside working all day, and no doubt he got into something..." I turned and looked him up and down. He looked clean enough. I leaned over and sniffed in his vicinity. The smell actually seemed less around him -- not more. "That's odd," I thought, "I was pretty sure it was him."

I looked at all the people sitting closely around me. "It could be any one of these people," I thought. I began to lean toward various ones, innocently trying to sniff out the offender. Curiously, each time I leaned away, the smell lessened a bit in intensity... and I began to notice the pattern.

Like Sherlock, I finally reached the only logical conclusion -- it was my wife! She was sitting right next to me! Who else could it be -- it had to be her! I leaned over and sniffed her -- from the top of her head to the sole of her feet. She actually smelled pretty good. Hmmm...

Suddenly, the truth began to waft over me. The logic was undeniable. The conclusion was inescapable. The smell seemed strongest in my immediate vicinity -- because it was me! But how could this be? I looked down at my own feet and I immediately saw the problem. As we were leaving the house in the darkness, I took a shortcut -- I had ventured off the sidewalk and walked through the grass in the darkness to get to the car -- and in doing so I had stepped in a fresh (and apparently quite huge) pile of dog poop. The poop had nearly engulfed my right shoe, and it had subsequently somehow worked its way up the outside right leg of my blue jeans. "Oh no!" I thought, "It's me! Now what? I can't stay here -- but our game is about to start!"

After a brief chat with my wife, I got up and started making my way out, nodding and speaking briefly to our friends in the area. I quickly slipped out of the gym and walked briskly to the car. I knew I would miss much of my child's game, but there was no choice -- I had stepped in it, and now I had to deal with the aftermath! I drove home -- a considerable distance from the school -- and went back into the house (this time being careful to stay on the sidewalk!). I changed my shoes, socks, and pants and quickly drove back to the school. I slipped back into the gym and made my way to my seat. My dad asked, "Hey, where have you been?" I chuckled and said, "I'll tell you later!" I was able to catch the final minutes of the game. No, it wasn't ideal; I just had to make the best of it!

Sometimes life is that way. Sometimes we just mess up -- we just step in it -- knee deep. Because of our own choices -- our own short-cuts -- we find ourselves in a stinky, intolerable, horrible situation we never anticipated. As much as we wish we could, we can't blame anyone else -- the horrible smell is coming from us! There is no "undo" button. There is no quick-fix. We can't unscramble the egg. Life for us will never be quite the same. What now? What can we do? Where do we turn?

From my own experience, I only know one way to deal with such situations. Obviously, we can't change the past -- no matter how much we wish to do so. The only thing we can do is admit our failure, lay our mess at God's feet, claim the forgiveness He has for us through His Son -- Jesus Christ, repair the damage we can repair, and move on in life (seeking to live life God's way, not our way). I think of this as the "from this point forward" approach. (There are details to "seeking forgiveness through Christ" and "living life God's way" I'd be happy to discuss at any time, but here, I am speaking in generalities.)

There is no mess we can create that is so smelly and offensive that God can't handle it -- if we will let Him. His love, grace, and forgiveness are beyond our ability to fully grasp. In the New Testament, we read of something called "redemption" that God does for us through Christ. Redemption has many facets, but one important aspect is that God "redeems" us from the destructive path we are on in life so we can live on a new path... by a new approach... where we will experience and learn things like: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In time, as we walk with Him, these things will flow from our own lives quite naturally -- like fruit from a tree (Galatians 5:22-23)!

Paul, the apostle, had done some pretty bad things in his earlier life. Before he became a Christian, he had tried his best to rid the world of Christians! He had Christians arrested, tortured, and put to death. He split Christian families apart, and he mercilessly led efforts to destroy Christianity in places far and wide. Later, in a dramatic turn of events, he realized he was doing wrong, and -- to the surprise of everyone -- he became a Christian! Later on in his life, how difficult it must have been at times to deal with his past! How many times in his work among the churches did he meet Christians who had lost family members at his hands? How could he live day after day with such guilt, shame, and remorse? The failures of his past humbled him. He wrote:

12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. 13 Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. 14 The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. 16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. ~~1 Timothy 1:12-16 [NIV]

When Paul thought of his past, he considered himself “the worst of sinners.” But he did not wallow in his smelly past. Oh, he could have spent his days wallowing -- he certainly had a ready supply of muck! But he knew he had been rescued for a purpose -- he had been redeemed from a dead-end life to a higher calling! And when he remembered the shame of his earlier mistakes, he was reminded of the great love and mercy of Christ. In another place, Paul describes his approach to dealing with his past in a wonderful way:

7 But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. 10 I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. ~~ Philippians 3:7-14 [NIV]

Paul looked at his past -- the good and the bad -- and considered it all as “loss” and “garbage” when compared to his new purpose in life. His new overarching goal is to “know Christ.” But notice verses 13-14, where Paul says “But one thing I do...” Paul here shares his secret to dealing with the past: “Forgetting what is behind and straining forward to what is ahead, I press on toward the goal... heavenward in Christ Jesus.” Paul can’t really forget the past -- but he lets it go... he puts it out of his mind... he chooses not to dwell on it or focus on it -- or to wallow in it. He makes it his aim to press on toward the goal before him -- to live the best he can from this point forward!

David Mills, Fayetteville, Tennessee
DavidVMills@bellsouth.net

Where are you right now in your life? Things may be a mess. You may have stepped in a steaming pile of shame up to your knee-caps... Your past decisions have brought pain and embarrassment and dishonor. But this doesn't mean it's time to quit or to wallow in failure. The past is over. It is done. You can't change it -- even if you want to.

What can you do? You have the power to make changes in your present that will affect your future! I encourage you to make up your mind -- right now -- to commit yourself to living life in a God-honoring way from this point forward. The present is all we really have.

Oh, uh... and check your shoes.

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