

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE: BEING GOOD EXAMPLES

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LIKE IT OR NOT, YOU ARE ALWAYS INFLUENCING OTHERS BY THE EXAMPLES YOU SET. HOW CAN YOU BE A GOOD EXAMPLE?

Whenever we give our lives away to others, we are discipling them. Through example, training, and the opening of our own hearts, we seek to teach others what we know. This is basic material for one who has studied discipleship. Jesus summarized it when he stated, "...everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Lk. 6:40). The principle is called modeling, and it entails the impartation of one person's life, love, and vision to another. It involves an older Christian saying, with Paul, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1Cor.11:1).

It is this modeling of the Christian life that is the heart of discipling—not techniques or methods, not simple exhortations that aren't backed up by example. Discipling is built on the principle of exemplifying Christ so that others see Him living in us.

In the process of growth, we are always models to others. Like it or not, someone is watching our responses, attitudes, and perspectives, and is adapting our characteristics into his own life.

If we are serious with ourselves, we know that others are modeling them selves after us, and we acknowledge our own shortcomings. Our poor examples are emulated more often than

our good ones. While we hope our disciples see our diligence in Bible study, they actually learn that we think it is okay to be short-tempered on the basketball court.

Our frustration with ourselves in our exemplary living ought to lead us to some basic questions: How can I be a better example of Christian life and character? How can I pour myself out into the lives of others? How can I be a more complete model of Christian life and character?

For answers to these questions, consider a verse Paul used to summarize his discipling ministry with the Philippians. In this verse he gives us a model himself-of being a complete example, a thorough discipler, a true Christian model. In this summary we find a challenge for our lives on what it means to be a model to others.

"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." (Phil. 4:9)

At first reading, I thought, "I could never be that good an example! Let someone else try to be a model!" But if we study the passage in light of Paul's life, it becomes more manageable and more applicable to our lives.

Commentators break the verse into two verb pairs, joining "learned" and "received" into the first pair and "heard" and "seen"

into the second. The first pair summarizes the training Paul gave. Things "learned" or "received" concern matters of doctrine, theology, teaching, and lifestyle that he communicated as the Philippians' spiritual "coach." This pair of verbs summarizes Paul's example to the Philippians as a man of intellectual reason and consistency.

The second pair relates to practical training, the life example Paul gave. Things "heard" and "seen" were communicated in the rigors of daily living and through the crucible of human experience. If the first aspect of his modeling was Paul's saying, "This is what you need to know," the second was his saying, "And this is how what you know fleshes itself in the arena of daily experience."

THAT WHICH YOU HAVE LEARNED AND RECEIVED

When we study Paul as a communicator and teacher, we find at least four areas of training Paul wanted to give his disciples. As he explained to them the meaning and implications of the Christian life, he concentrated on certain themes. These four themes offer insight to us in our modeling ministry to others. They teach us areas where we ought to train our disciples so that they are solid in the Christian faith. And they apply equally in our modeling toward all people friends, fellow church members, our children, employers and employees.

Doctrine

We live in an age of disrespect for doctrine. While some say by life and belief, "It doesn't really matter what someone believes, as long as he's sincere," others overcompensate and heighten their obsession with correct doctrine so that everyone is scrutinized with Inquisition-like zeal in an effort to uncover bad doctrine.

Paul's teaching ministry had a more balanced approach. He insisted on proper discernment and doctrine, but he did not do it at the expense of love. Neither did he overemphasize minor points so as to make them central. In his teaching ministry as we know it, he emphasized seven doctrines, key theological points that he wanted each of his Christian associates to understand clearly:

- 1) The finished work of Jesus Christ (Gal. 3);
- 2) Who the believer is "in Christ" (Colossians);
- 3) Justification by faith alone (Ro. 5-8);
- 4) The forgiveness we have in Christ (Col. 1:13-14; Eph. 2);
- 5) The authority of God's Word (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Ro. 15:4);
- 6) Spiritual gifts and the nature of the Church (Ephesians; 1 Cor. 12-14; Ro. 12);
- 7) The return of Christ (1 Thess. 4:16-18; 1 Cor. 15:50-58).

It is ironic that the doctrines Paul found essential are often

missing in my example to others. Rather than following his example, I prefer to avoid some of the points he emphasized because they cause too much trouble in the life of a young Christian. Would Paul avoid these if he were alive today?

Practical Commands

Paul often issued pragmatic directives to the Christians he instructed. After a healthy dose of doctrine, he brought the doctrine into the realm of human experience by listing commands about Christian living.

The examples of these instructive sections are numerous. In Ro. 12-14, he teaches believers about Christian behavior. In 1 Thess. 5:14-22, he reels off imperatives like bullets out of a machine gun, giving the Thessalonians pithy commands that they can take with them into daily experience.

In each presentation to the believers, Paul taught them doctrine and right beliefs, but he also spent much time teaching people how to "work out their salvation" in practical terms. As a model of Christian teaching, Paul did not sacrifice content or application but wove the two into each lesson.

Exhortation

Paul was not afraid to be firm-both about doctrines and about people. In contrast to our contemporary teaching methods where we are so afraid to "step on people's toes," Paul spoke out with

vigor against sins and heresies.

The immoral man of 1 Cor. 5 was not a fuzzy issue for Paul. He addressed the matter directly, delivered the proud sinner over to Satan's control, and exhorted the congregation to get rid of the unholy leaven that was defiling them.

Paul had the courage to be direct and exhortative. He addressed sin as a violation of God's laws, not of dated norms from the first century that need to be modified with the culture. When the truth God had revealed was called into question, Paul spoke out; he knew the Philippians would know this, and he called them to emulate him.

Encouragement

Referring to Paul's exhortations can sometimes make him appear like a fire breathing dragon looking for a sinner to singe. A complete view of Paul in his life and letters shows that he was full of kind words and love for the people he taught.

Paul sought every opportunity to affirm and encourage those weak in faith or poor in applying Christian truth. The wayward Corinthians, with all their failings, were still the target of Paul's encouragement concerning all that they were in Christ (1 Cor. 1:4-9). The young Thessalonians, despite inevitable immaturity, were encouraged because of their example to others (1 Thess. 1:7), and Paul took extra effort to remind them that they were his

glory and crown and that he had a fond affection for them (1 Thess. 2:8, 20).

Paul also affirmed his disciples by expressing his confidence in them and giving them responsibilities. His speech in Acts 20:28ff reminds the believers of his confidence in them as the overseers of the household of God.

Whether through fervent prayers or outright expressions of love, Paul affirmed the people he taught. He realized that people grow just as much through gentle stroking as they do through harsh challenges, so he offered both.

THAT WHICH YOU HAVE HEARD AND SEEN

If the first part of Paul's example was his teaching and instruction, the second and equally important part was his own life. Through time with the believers, personal example, and an active modeling of Christian character, Paul put flesh on the skeleton of Christian truth. He tried, as a Christian traveler who was a few steps ahead of those he guided, to demonstrate the life of Christ at work in him by the things he said and did.

As we look at Paul as a model for discipling others, we need to ask, "What were the ingredients of his personal ministry to others? What were the factors in his life that he sought to give away to others as he built his life into theirs?"

Confidence

Paul had established himself in the faith and in his walk with God so that he was confident—not in himself but in God who filled his life (1 Cor. 15:10). This confidence materialized in his relationships with others as he expressed confidence in those who, by human standards, seemed to be losers.

The classic example is "timid Timothy." Paul saw something in this young man that no one else seemed to see. He made sure Timothy knew he regarded him as a man of God (1Tim.6:11) and as a beloved son (2 Tim. 1:2). He gave Timothy leadership responsibility because he knew the God-given potential in this young man. Paul showed his confidence in Timothy with an apparent attitude of, "Look, I know what God has done with my life, and I am positive that He can do it with yours."

A second benefactor of Paul's confidence was Philemon. Imagine being the recipient of a letter that starts off by affirming your love and faith, and then goes on to tell you that the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you (Phlm.7)! Later Paul repeats the affirmation by asking Philemon to refresh his heart in Christ (Phlm. 20). It is as if Paul takes the position of Philemon's disciple and asks Philemon to build him up even as he built up others. Only a God-given confidence emanating from a deep personal relationship with Christ could give Paul the ability to build others by seeing their potential in Christ.

Compassion

It is apparent through the records in Acts and in his epistles that Paul showed great love and affection to people. In practical, human terms, he knew how to love people. Some of the ways Paul's compassion for others worked itself out were: tears and emotions at leaving them (Acts 20:37); definite expressions of love (1 Cor. 16:24); singling out individuals by name (Ro. 16); expressed anticipation of seeing them (Ro. 1:11; 2 Tim. 1:3-4; Phlm. 22).

Paul loved his people, and he told them so. They knew they were dear to him (1 Thess. 2:8), and he demonstrated this affection by imparting "not only the gospel of God but our lives as well."

Prayer

If the epistles of Paul are any indication, it is doubtful that any of Paul's disciples ever wondered if he were praying for them. They might have hated his coarseness or his bluntness, but they always knew he was praying for them.

One can envision Paul entering a church he was visiting, greeting a brother by name, and asking a question about an issue about which the brother had asked Paul to pray. There was no sense of glibness in Paul when he claimed to be praying for others. He actually did it.

The people Paul cared about were always being assured of his

prayers. The Romans knew of his thankfulness for them and his intercession on their behalf (Ro. 1:8-10). The Corinthians were sure Paul was praying for deeper spiritual understanding for them (1 Cor. 1:4-9).

The Philippians and Ephesians knew Paul was on his knees on their behalf, asking God for continued growth for them (Phil. 1:9-11; Eph. 1:15-23). The Colossians and Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus and Philemon—all knew Paul was praying for them.

Perseverance

In a country where religious freedoms exist, we often fail to appreciate the example Paul set through his dogged endurance for the sake of Jesus Christ. For Paul, it was literally a life and death issue to follow Christ (see 2 Cor. 11:23-33), yet he endured, and he set the pace of endurance for many others.

Paul never asked his followers to do something he would not do. Even when he was entitled to apostolic support, he chose to work night and day so he and his co-laborers would not be burdens to the people of Thessalonica (2 Thess. 3:7-8).

Paul had lived a disciplined and thorough Christian life. He embodied his own command to persevere in tribulation (Ro. 12:12), and when, at the end of his life, he told Timothy that he had "fought the good fight" and "finished the race" (2 Tim. 4:7), there was no one who would argue.

Application

Paul's outstanding example of living the Christian life can be intimidating. But the intimidation can diminish if we make a few simple applications so that we know where to start in our own lives.

First, we must consider our teaching. Do we balance doctrine with practical application? Maybe we need to address some of those uncomfortable doctrines so that those we disciple get a more balanced spiritual diet. Perhaps we need to inquire more of our students to see what they are actually learning, not only what we think we are teaching.

Second, we must reflect on our encouragement and exhortation of others. Do people know we are proud of them and love them? Or is someone we work with locked into a sinful lifestyle that we have overlooked because it would cause such great turmoil to bring it up? To encourage, perhaps a few notes of appreciation are in order. To exhort, perhaps we should review our commitment to those we are teaching and remind our selves that wounds from a friend are faithful (Prov. 27:5-6).

Third, we must develop confidence in God's work in ourselves and in others. Are we growing in our own relationships with God so that we see His hand on our lives? Are we communicating the same type of compassion for and confidence in others that the Lord as

communicated to us by using us? Maybe a review of our own pilgrimage and a few hearty reminders of God's unconditional love will stimulate greater love for others in us.

Finally, we must evaluate our pace setting leadership. Do we lead by example or do we just like bossing people around? Do our disciples see us as people whose lives are characterized by diligence or perseverance? We have to take this business about being examples seriously if people are going to follow us because they see our endurance.

Paul had his failures. He blew opportunities. But God used him. The principles of God's grace still apply to us as we seek to disciple others. God will use us in spite of our flaws.

Yet God used Paul as an outstanding example, a model of Christ in every aspect of life, so that we have a target to aim at and an example to follow. Let the things people learn, receive, hear, and see in us lead them to Christ and to Christ like living.

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