

EXAMPLES: GOOD AND BAD (Philippians - Lessons for the Journey)
Philippians 3:15-19 - August 16, 2020 - Immanuel - Senior Pastor: Dr. Kelly McClendon

My older brother had sandy blonde hair in High School but he wanted to dye his hair black. I think he wanted to look like Elvis or Superman who were role models or heroes to him. He decided to do it himself and got that dye everywhere and made a mess of his hair. He had to go to my mothers' beauty parlor which was humiliating, because back in those days it was no-man's land. They had to dye his hair platinum blonde (almost neon) to get it to even out. The funny part was that his school pictures were taken that week - so that photo is hilarious. I think he decided he needed to find different role models or at least to imitate them differently.

When I was in High School, as I've mentioned before, I was always getting into trouble. I was fighting, or arguing with teachers, or skipping class, or just being rebellious. Much later a counselor told me I was just "acting out" because of my traumatic experiences. However, my teachers handled it by giving me detention which I settled by taking a paddling - or what they called "licks." During my junior year I set a school record for the most in a single year - 60. At the start of my senior year a tiny freshman came up to me and said, "*You're my hero! I'm going to break your record for the most detention slips!*" I was stunned. Suddenly, in a moment, I realized how ridiculous and stupid I had been and how pitiful and example I had set for this kid. It broke my heart, and I decided then and there I needed to change - and I never got another detention or lick again in school. I told that kid to find a better role model. Thank God I eventually found some better role models for myself who helped lead me to Christ.

It is human nature to model our lives after the people we admire for whatever reason - and some reasons are better than others. Some people model their lives after sports figures, or media figures, or in some sad cases they model their lives after criminal figures. You will see people adopt certain mannerisms, catch phrases, and attitudes and actions of their role models.

The right role model can help set a good pace for us to follow. I've benefitted greatly from various role models. There are scholars who have changed my way of thinking. There are writers who have inspired me to see the world in new ways and to empathize more with people who are different from me. There are theologians, and historians and philosophers who have helped me expand my perspective and wisdom. There are preachers whose style has impacted my own. My pastor in college, became my most valued mentor and a father-figure to me. Most every day I stop to consider what he might say or do as part of my decision making process. Whenever I make a choice I wonder if he would be proud of me for it. Role models can lead us forward and help us to grow and prosper. But if we choose the wrong role models - they can also drag us down and lead us astray.

The Apostle Paul understood this and he wrote this to the Philippians (by the Spirit to us also),
Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.

I want to talk about good and bad examples today.

This is a gross oversimplification, but there are generally two kinds of people in any church. There are those who imitate the Savior and those who imitate the world. Paul encourages us to “keep your eyes on those” those who live godly lives so we can follow their good example.

In 1 Corinthians 15:33 Paul quotes a Greek poet who said, “Do not be deceived: Bad company corrupts good morals.” If you follow the bad example of bad role models, you will move in the wrong direction in your Christian life. So, what should we be looking for? What are the characteristics of good and bad role models or examples? We’ll start with the **negative**.

Listen again to Philippians 3 verses 18-19,

For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach [or their appetites] and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.

There are at least three negative characteristics we can discern in these words.

1. Bad examples are enemies of the cross

I think the essence of this is when someone diminishes the importance of what Christ did on the cross. Of course some people are atheists or deny any need for salvation at all (that is too big to tackle now, and that was not Paul’s focus). His focus was on the false doctrines and bad actions of misguided people in the church. These people preached a false way of salvation. They either minimized the work of Christ and emphasized our own efforts (the sin of the Judaizers) or they used the grace of God as a license (or excuse) for sin. In the first case, as I talked about last week, they suggested, by their reliance on religious practice, that the cross wasn’t enough and so we need to supplement it by our good works or acts of piety. In the second case they said, “*Since Christ has saved us by grace, it doesn’t matter how we live. We can sin all we want and still go to Heaven, because Jesus paid it all.*” In other words they used the cross and the grace of God as an excuse for immorality.

These two groups still exist in the church today. There will always be those who urge us to try to earn a salvation that has already been accomplished or paid for by Christ. They exalt themselves, or the role of people, and they diminish God’s grace. They often spend much of their time keeping score or acting as a fruit inspector or judge of other Christians. In their mind we simply need to try harder to live the way we should and then we will be right with God. They put human effort first and God’s grace second. The gospel, however, says we need lay down our lives in surrender to God - **because we have nothing to offer but our brokenness.** Our good deeds or words are worth nothing when it comes to being saved. We must die to sin and self and any attempt to earn salvation and then wait for God to give us new life in Christ - by grace through faith. Paul reminds us that we are saved only because of the work of Christ. God began the good work and God will bring it to completion. As I said last week, the good works we must do, come after we are made right with God, and God makes even that possible.

The other group takes freedom to an extreme. It is certainly true that we can do nothing to earn our own salvation, but that doesn't mean that we should discount God's commands or expectations for us. There will always be those who try to justify or rationalize away their sin. The true believer relies on grace, but they also recognize the destructive power of sin and never take it lightly. They want to grow in holiness, as a form of gratitude, but also because they know that grace is an awesome gift that should be treasured and not presumed upon. They also want to become more like Christ, their savior and Lord, and Christ is Holy and without sin.

2. Bad examples are Ruled by their Appetites

Poor models let their sensual appetites determine their values rather than the other way around. They justify the way they behave by telling you that it makes them happy, or it "feels right" or "it is satisfying" or "it works for me." In each of these cases the standard is not the objective truth of scripture, or the will of God, it is the subjective truth of their feelings. In each case God's will is subject to the whims of people rather than the other way around.

If you have ever tried to diet, you know what it is like to be ruled by your appetite. Your intention is to eat sensibly and to cut out the junk food so you can maintain better health and be more productive. Your intentions are good, at least until your stomach starts grumbling. Many people start a diet right after a big meal and give it up as soon as they get hungry again.

The same is true in the spiritual life of many. They talk about obeying and loving the Lord but as soon as a strong desire for something sinful gets their attention they give into it. Their orientation is about them, and what God can do for them, or what others can do for them, or what will fulfill them physically or emotionally. They have life backwards. We must put God first, and we must live for God, not the other way around. We must find our deepest fulfillment in obeying God - which will often bring deep satisfaction, better than anything the world has to offer, but sometimes it will also bring self-denial, and self-sacrifice, and even suffering in the short-run. If, as Paul suggest, our "god is our belly" then that price will be too high to pay.

Now please understand that we all give in to our appetite's on occasion (or you might say we give in to our sinful and selfish nature) but hopefully we are repentant when we do so and we quickly turn back to God. We don't want to model our lives after any person who is governed by their appetite over the course of their life. At best, the spiritual lives of these people have a tendency to swing one way or another depending on their feelings at any particular time. They are unreliable guides, just like our feelings are unreliable. Worse, as Paul said, "their destiny is destruction" so you don't want to follow anyone to that destination.

3. Bad examples are Proud of What Should bring them Shame

In 1 Corinthians 5:1-2, Paul writes to the Corinthians to give an example of this very thing,

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?

Here's the situation: There was a man who was committing adultery with his stepmother! In bible times that was incest as well. Rather than the church being horrified, they were proud of their tolerance and open-mindedness! Apparently they were proud of the fact that they "didn't judge" and were fully inclusive of this person's alternative lifestyle. Paul said they were wrong. Sin is always destructive to the people engaged in it - in the short-run or the long-run or in eternity and often all three. If we adopt a "live and let live" attitude it is the same as saying you don't care about the potential harm that sin will cause to the person doing it or to the people impacted by the behavior. If we go on to redefine sin and then call it good, it's the same as saying you don't care what the Bible, or God, have to say about our behavior. Being proud or affirming of sinful behavior is a sign of depravity and not of maturity. It's a sign that you've been molded to fit the ways of the world and their standards instead of God's.

Unfortunately, some people, especially Christians, who are proud of what they ought to be ashamed of, are very well-intentioned even though they are misguided. They are driven by compassion and kindness. They care about people who are suffering or being treated unjustly or cruelly by others. All of that is good and right. However, it's not compassion or kindness to affirm or celebrate any behaviors or beliefs that the bible calls sinful. Instead our compassion and kindness, in the face of sin, ought to lead us to grief, accountability and discipline. In the case of the Corinthians, it was so bad, that Paul said, they needed to ask a person to leave the church until they repented of their sin and turned back to God. It was serious business.

Let me go back and speak about what good examples or positive role models are like.

Verses 15-17 say this,

All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained. Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.

Later in verses 20-21 we read,

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

1. Good examples Hunger to Know Christ Better

The first thing Paul says about good role models is that they should be mature like him. At first, this sounds a bit arrogant, but think carefully about what Paul is actually telling us.

- He recognized that he was in the process of growth (that is a humble awareness)
- He was constantly in search of a deeper relationship with Christ
- His focus was on God's grace not his own goodness
- His hope was in the future that only Christ could make possible

A good role model is one that desires a vital relationship with Christ in the present and is not content with past accomplishments. They are constantly striving to honor and serve the Lord. They aren't just seeking more information - they want to know Jesus in a more personal and intimate way and they want honor Christ with every breath of their life. They also place their future hope in Christ's promises over their own plans or anything the world has to offer.

2. They have a Teachable Spirit

Paul told the Philippians that if they didn't agree with him, the Lord would make it plain to them some day. When I first read this, I reacted negatively. I remember people who spoke to me in condescending ways when I was started out in ministry. They would smile, pat my head, and dismiss me with the words, "*Oh, someday you'll understand.*" I was resentful because I was immature. As time went on, I discovered they were right. I had to experience and learn more to realize how inexperienced and ignorant I really was - and how much I needed people who would correct me (hopefully by speaking the truth in love). I'm so grateful for the patience of those people, and I still need that patience because I'm far from being fully holy.

Paul understood that we grow at different rates. He knew that others may need time to understand what he had come to understand. Paul was confident that God would make His will clear if the people maintained a teachable spirit - willing to listen, learn, and accept criticism.

Do you know the greatest hindrance to finding God's will? It is our unwillingness to learn God's will. Hear that again - the greatest hindrance to finding God's will is our unwillingness to learn God's will. Many of us who struggle with what God wants us to do are actually struggling to figure out how to get God to approve of what WE want to do. It is our will be done, rather than God's will be done. They think they have a plan, and know what is right and what needs to happen, and they are just waiting for God to get on board. If you want to know God's will for your life, you must first be teachable. You need to be open and attentive. You need to accept, and even long for, God's correcting and redirecting, and should know that God's plans and purposes are often the very opposite of what you want to do.

Any coach or instructor can tell you that talent and teachability are not the same thing. A person can have all kinds of talent but if they aren't willing to learn from someone else they will be limited in what they can do. The greatest musicians, the greatest athletes, the greatest business minds all have one thing in common . . . they are eager to learn anything that will help them improve. They ask questions. They listen. They are receptive to being challenged. They see feedback as a friend if it helps them to improve. We need that attitude as Christians.

Good role models are the ones who keep their heads - and their graciousness - when there are disagreements in the church. These people won't compromise on core beliefs but they won't be stubborn or meanspirited on issues that aren't core beliefs (which is most issues). They are willing for the Lord to "make it clear to them." In other words, they are willing to learn that they are wrong and need to change. Their ego or insecurity does not hinder their growth.

3. They Act on What They Say They Believe

Paul said, "Only let us live up to what we have already attained." In other words, rather than wasting time arguing over our differences and debating about what we don't understand, how much better would it be if we acted on what we DO understand?

Let me take this a little further. Paul didn't claim to know everything, but what he did know about God's will he carefully followed. He told the Philippians to follow his example because he worked to live consistently. His words and actions matched. These are the kind of people you want for your role models - those who live up to what they say they believe.

In his book, Be Hopeful, Warren Wiersbe shared this story,

In the summer of 1805 a number of Indian chiefs and warriors met in council at Buffalo Creek, New York, to hear a presentation of the Christian message by a Mr. Cram from the Boston Missionary Society. After the sermon a response was given by Red Jacket, one of the leading chiefs. Among other things, the chief said this:

Brother, we are told that you have been preaching to the white people in this place. These people are our neighbors. We are acquainted with them. We will wait a little while and see what effect your preaching has upon them. If we find it does them good, makes them honest and less disposed to cheat Indians, we will then consider again what you have said.

In other words - the proof is in the pudding. Which means you can only judge the quality of something after you have personally tasted, tried, used, or experienced it. In the case of Christianity it means - people need to see and hear consistency between what our faith claims, and our words and actions. We need to find role models who are consistent as well.

There are a few other things we should consider when we select our role models,

- The only role model who is perfect is Jesus. Every other model has weaknesses. Don't make your role models into something they are not and keep aware of their weaknesses.
- The best model is one who has been consistent over the "long haul." Anyone can look good for a little while. Some have said that the best role models are those who've been dead for 100 years or so - after there has been enough time to discover any or all the skeleton's in their closets and after time to consider the sum total of their words and actions. That's good wisdom.
- Never put any role model above the Bible. If your mentor consistently does or says things that are contrary to scripture then you need to start looking for another mentor.

Where do you find these good models? Let me give you some suggestions,

- Study the life of Jesus as it is recorded in the bible.
- Read the bible to learn from the words & actions of Biblical characters (esp. the Apostles).
- Read historical biographies of those who have impacted the world for Christ (like John Wesley, or Martin Luther, or Charles Spurgeon, John Calvin, and many others)
- Don't overlook the good models you may have in your parents, grandparents, or siblings (and if you have good & godly role examples there then thank God for that great blessing).
- Look around at your fellow church members and note those who seem to live well for Christ. Get to know them and learn from their example. They are many people in this church whose good example I try to follow.
- Read and listen to contemporary teachers and preachers and writers - I listen to sermons and talks and read articles and books most every day trying to find good examples to follow

My last word is this - make it your aim to be a good example to others (in all these ways).

In 1 Corinthians 11:1 the Apostle Paul said, *“Imitate me, just as I imitate Christ.”*

Many years ago, at a big church conference, a young pastor that I knew came up to me and said, *“I have no idea what is going on here, or what I am supposed to be doing. Can I follow you around so you can show me the way.”* My first thought was, *“I am not that sure either.”* But I also thought to myself, *“I am here trying to follow Christ, so if this guy follows me, for the most part he will be going in the right direction.”*

In the end that may be the best any of us can do. We can make it our aim to follow Christ and to be like him, as the Holy Spirit enables us, so that as others follow us they will ultimately be following Christ - who alone is the way, and the truth, and the life.