***GOOD EXAMPLES***

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Texts: Genesis 15:1-6 and Philippians 3:17-4:1

Who do you want to be like when you grow up – regardless of how much growing up you have left to do? Whose example do you want to follow? Do you want to be like your mom or your dad, your grandfather or grandmother? Do you want to be like the mentor who taught you how to do what you do or the genius who always seemed to do the thing that was beyond your grasp? Some years ago Michael Jordan appeared in a commercial with a catchy jingle, “I want to be, I want to be, I want to be like Mike.” And a whole generation of young kids wanted to be like Michael Jordan, to soar and dunk as he did, just as today’s young players want to be like Steph Curry or Lebron James. Who do you want to be like? Do you want to be like

a rock star with her cadre of adoring fans or

an opera singer whose voice can melt the hearts of a spellbound audience or

an actor whose face is recognized the world over or

a teacher who holds her class spellbound or

a scientist who makes the next great discovery.

Perhaps it is someone closer to home who you want to emulate – a popular kid in school, a neighbor with a big house on the hill, a friend for whom everything she touches turns to gold, a parent whose kids always seem to do the right thing, an acquaintance who seems to be at peace with the world and herself. Whose footsteps do you want to follow on your walk through life?

Dale Berra followed in the footsteps of his hall-of-fame father Yogi Berra who famously said, “I’m not going to buy my kids an encyclopedia. Let them walk to school like I did.” They were big shoes to fill, but Dale did his best. “Me and my dad are a lot alike,” he said, “but our similarities are different.” A lot of us have different similarities from those we want to follow. We have different talents, different perspectives, unique experiences that shape who we are and who we may yet be. But as diverse as we are:

we hold in common a calling to be disciples of Jesus Christ;

we hold in common a command to love God with all that we are and

to love our neighbors as ourselves;

we hold in common Christ’s direction that we deny ourselves, take up our crosses daily, and follow him;

we hold in common faith in Jesus as the Messiah of God;

we hold in common God’s expectation that our lives reflect that faith.

Does the life of the one whose example you want to follow reflect that faith or some other value? Does he or she offer an example worth following?

Writing to the church in Philippi, Paul urges his brothers and sisters in Christ to follow his example. It sounds like another narcissistic line from Donald Trump – “I urge you to be more like me!” But keep in mind that for the Philippians Paul was more than a friend, more than a brother in Christ. He was their teacher from whom they learned about Jesus, their mentor from whom they learned about Christian living, their example of what it meant to be a disciple of Christ. There were no other examples for them to follow, no other Christians with more than an inkling of what Christian living might look like. The Church was too young. There were no Bob Wetzels or Pat Menks, no Mother Teresa or Francis of Assisi to whom the Philippians could look for examples of faithful living. In fact the examples they had to follow were, not unlike our own cultural icons, less than faithful witnesses.

“Their god is the belly,” says Paul. “Their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.” There is some dispute about whom Paul is speaking, but interestingly the dispute is between two groups who represent polar opposites – the left and the right if you will, the liberal and the conservative, the libertine and the Pharisee – two groups from whom we continue to hear this day, exhorting us to follow them.

On one extreme were those new Christians who found in Christ’s teaching freedom from the Law. They professed faith in Christ and then lived as they wanted, satisfying their own selfish desires. They said, “I believe in Jesus!” and then bought the biggest home and car they could find while the poor had nowhere to sleep. They said, “I believe in Jesus!” and satisfied their appetites for fine food, adulterous relationships and the finest things money could buy while ignoring the needs of their neighbors. They said, “I believe in Jesus!” but took advantage of others and belittled the weak. They said, “I believe in Jesus” but they lived for themselves. They bought into culture’s claims that they were independent, self-made men who deserved the good life. They dared to believe that God didn’t care how they lived or what they did as long as they said, “I believe in Jesus!”

“Their end is destruction,” says Paul. To be a Christian is to take seriously the commands of Christ: to deny yourself instead of satisfying all your desires, to curb your sinful appetites, to offer yourself in obedience to God, to love and serve your neighbor. To profess faith in Christ is not a license to do as you wish, but an invitation to follow Jesus’ example and live as Christ commands. “Faith without works is dead,” writes James. Works don’t save you, but faith without any works is a sham, for faith transforms us. As the song says, they will know we are Christians by our love; without love, we can hardly claim to be Christian. Faith is more than “I believe in Jesus!” It is transformation of your life, so that you are more like Jesus and thus more like the person God wants you to be.

At the other extreme were those Christians who demanded obedience to the Law. They insisted that to be a good Christian you must follow the dietary laws, be circumcised, and not play cards on Sunday. They could never quite grasp salvation by the grace of God, but sought instead to assure their salvation by adhering to a set of rules by which every Christian must abide. They are the folks today who turn the Bible into a rulebook for conduct, insisting that to be a Christian is to follow a list of rules – specific do’s and don’ts – rather than doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God. They make salvation their work instead of God’s work, for they alone know the words for all true professions of faith and the proper interpretation for all passages of Scripture. They insist prayers must end with “in Jesus’ name” in order to be effective. They are self-righteous, veri-religious and judgmental, and their end is destruction, says Paul.

To be a faithful disciple is to reject these two extremes – the libertine who says that anything goes as long as you say “I believe in Jesus” and the Pharisee who insists that following Christ is obeying a list of strict rules. To be a disciple of Jesus is to affirm with your lips AND your life that Jesus Christ is Lord. Your life will testify to your faith, to those things in which you believe, those things you value, those things that are priorities in your life. What does your life say about you and your faith? Is it marked by humility, faithfulness, love and justice? Or by pride, selfishness, self-righteousness and greed? Does your life reflect obedience to God as your aim or is it advertisers who shape your priorities? Mother Teresa said she sought not to be successful, but to be faithful. Which is more important to you?

Author Chaim Potok tells of wanting to be a writer from an early age, but when he headed off to college his mother took him aside and said, “Chaim, I know you want to be a writer, but I have a better idea. Why don’t you be a brain surgeon! You’ll keep a lot of people from dying; you’ll make a lot of money.” Chaim replied, “No, mama. I want to be a writer.” When he returned for his fall break his mother took him aside and said, “Chaim, I know you want to be a writer, but listen to your mama. Be a brain surgeon. You’ll keep a lot of people from dying; you’ll make a lot of money.” Chaim replied, “No, mama. I want to be a writer.” When he returned for his holiday break his mother found him alone and said, “Chaim, I know you want to be a writer, but listen to your mama. Be a brain surgeon. You’ll keep a lot of people from dying; you’ll make a lot of money.” Chaim replied, “No, mama. I want to be a writer.” This exchange was repeated at every term break, every summer, every meeting, until finally there was an explosion. His mother had had enough: “Chaim,” she said, you’re wasting your time. Be a brain surgeon. You’ll keep a lot of people from dying; you’ll make a lot of money.” And Chaim responded, “Mama, I don’t want to keep people from dying; I want to show them how to live!”[[1]](#endnote-1)

That is what we are to do –

to show people how to live – as disciples of Jesus Christ,

to show people how to love,

to show people how to walk through life with joy, hope, and peace.

It is that example we are to set, that example we are to follow. As you are saving people from dying or building bridges or selling insurance or fixing teeth or explaining how to multiply fractions or teaching ABC’s or rocking a grandchild or visiting with a friend over dinner or doing whatever it is that you do, teach those with whom you spend your time how to live. Teach them by your example, for that is what Jesus did for us – showed us how to live as children of God.

Who do you want to be like? Whose example do you want to follow? Join in imitating me, says Paul. Or better yet, imitate Jesus. Amen

1. Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, pp.46-47 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)