

November 1, 2009

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Imitate Worthy Leaders

Philippians 2:19 – 30

The clarion call to Christians from the book of Philippians is the call to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is, we have so embraced the gospel that it spills out in our everyday life and affects our thinking, our speaking and our living. It is a cross-centered, gospel-permeated, God-exalting life, over which flies the banner – **To live is Christ and to die is gain** – with the ambition that whether in life or in death, **Christ will be magnified**. It is a kind of living in which the gospel is written large, and we see it in lives of men like William Borden – whose motto was: **No Reserves, No Retreats and No Regrets**. And in women, like Amy Carmichael who served in India for fifty-five years and answered a young girl's inquiry as to what life as a missionary was all about by saying, **'Missionary life is simply a chance to die.'** And Jim Elliot, who died along with four other men bringing the gospel to an unreached South American tribe who once wrote: **'He is no fool to give what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.'** And Helen Roseveare who ministered in the Congo for twenty years who said: **"If Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him."** And Hudson Taylor in China who said: **If I had a thousand pounds China should have it- if I had a thousand lives, China should have them. No! Not China, but Christ. Can we do too much for Him? Can we do enough for such a precious Saviour?**

These are just a few of the men and women throughout history who impacted the world for the cause of Christ because they walked in a manner worthy of the gospel. And Scripture is replete with the summons to us to emulate such lives. In Ephesians we are called to be imitators of God: *Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children*. Ephesians 5:1 To the Corinthians and to the Philippians Paul says: *Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ*. 1 Corinthians 11:1 And *Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us*. Philippians 3:17 Paul urges the Thessalonians to consciously copy the way of life exhibited by those who ministered the gospel among them: *For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you*, 2 Thessalonians 3:7 *And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit*, 1 Thessalonians 1:6 And the writer of the book of Hebrews tells the saints to: *Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith*. Hebrews 13:7

It is clear that living a life worthy of the gospel is helped along and strengthened by consciously imitating worthy individuals in the faith whose lives reflect the highest ambition and hunger for God.

The truth is, we all end up imitating somebody to a certain degree. Sons are a chip off the old block – daughters grow up to be their mothers – students unconsciously imitate their teachers, and so on. Dr. Paul Brand, who authored two books that are on my must read list: ***Fearfully and Wonderfully Made***, and ***In His Image***, tells about the time he was instructing a group of his student interns as they made their rounds in the hospital in India, and he had one of the students examining one of the woman patients under their care:

Suddenly something caught my eye - a slight twitch of movement on the intern's face. Was it the eyebrow arching upward? A vague memory stirred in my mind, but one I could not fully recall. His questions were leading into a delicate area, especially in demure Hindu society. Had the woman ever been exposed to a venereal infection? The intern's facial muscles contracted into an expression combining sympathy, inquisitiveness, and disarming warmth as he looked straight in the patient's face and asked the questions. His very countenance coaxed the woman to relax, put aside the awkwardness, and tell us the truth. At that moment my memory snapped into place. Of course! The left eyebrow cocked up with the right one trailing down, the wry, enticing smile, the head tilted to one side, the twinkling eyes-" these were unmistakably the features of my old chief surgeon in London, Professor Robin Pilcher. I sucked in my breath sharply and exclaimed. The students looked up, startled by my reaction. I could not help it; it seemed as if the intern had studied Professor Pilcher's face for an acting audition and was now drawing from his repertoire to impress me. Answering their questioning looks, I explained myself. "That is the face of my old chief! What a coincidence - you have exactly the same expression, yet you've never been to England and Pilcher certainly has never visited India." At first the students stared at me in confused silence. Finally two or three of them grinned. "We don't know any Professor Pilcher," one said. ***But Dr. Brand, that was your expression he was wearing.***"

The fact is we either consciously or unconsciously learn the behaviors and mannerisms of those to whom we look for models, and the question is not whether we will learn from others but what shall we learn and from whom shall we learn it. And one of the reasons Paul describes how Christ lived; and talks about the proven worth of Timothy and the faithfulness of Ephaphroditus is to model good Christian character for the Philippians, and for us. So let's see what that looks like.

Imitate those who walk in obedient humility

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Philippians 2:5-8

The place to start imitating a worthy life is the life of Christ. How did He walk when He was on the earth? How did He conduct Himself? And the characteristic that Paul extols is obedient humility. Paul is very clear – 'Have this mind' – make this kind of thinking yours. Christ made Himself nothing – came as a servant – and humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death.

Dr. Harry Ironside was once convicted about his lack of humility. A friend recommended as a remedy, that he march through the streets of Chicago wearing a sandwich board, shouting the scripture verses extolling humility and the sin of pride on the board for all to hear. Dr. Ironside agreed to this venture and when he returned to his study and removed the board, he said "I'll bet there's not another man in town who would do that."

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Ephesians 5:1-2 Imitate those who walk in love and exemplify a sacrificial kind of living. Sacrifice is first and foremost, worship. **It is offering all that you are and all that you have to be used by God to do with whatever brings Him pleasure.** To live sacrificially, means that you don't spend a lot of time on yourself, considering your own comfort and wants and needs – but you are living for Christ who called you out of darkness and into His marvelous light. And the ironic thing is, what seems like sacrifice to the uninitiated, really isn't.

David Livingstone, who spent his life serving God in Africa in what would appear to be primitive and sacrificial conditions said this: *'People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply acknowledging a great debt we owe to our God, which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny? It is emphatically no sacrifice. Rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, danger, foregoing the common conveniences of this life—these may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing compared with the glory which shall later be revealed in and through us. I never made a sacrifice. Of this we ought not to talk, when we remember the great sacrifice which He made who left His Father's throne on high to give Himself for us.'* David Livingstone

Imitate those who are unselfish

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. Philippians 2:19-21

It follows that those who are obediently humble are also unselfish. William Temple wrote that: **'Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself one way or the other at all.'** And when we are free from thinking overmuch about ourselves, how we are doing, what is going on in our little circle of life, we are freed up to be genuinely concerned about the welfare of others and to focus on the interests of Christ. The gospel is intensely other-centered. This is why missions exist. The gospel has so impacted our minds and hearts and lives that the outpouring and overflow of God's love and mercy toward us must necessarily spill out on others. I would say that those whose hearts are full of His love cannot help but be other-centered, because that is the nature of Christ's love for us.

So imitate those whose lives demonstrate unselfishness – emulate leaders in the faith who demonstrate a godly other-centeredness. Avoid those who who initiate and sustain their conversations with the frequent use of 'I'. Run from those who have to have the first place in everything. Copy those who not offended when no one asks about them because they are too busy asking about others. Imitate those who are not resentful when someone snubs them, or nurses every insult, or challenges every word spoken against them, or cringes when someone else is preferred before them. Imitate those who make themselves of no reputation like Jesus and live sacrificial lives serving others.

Imitate those of proven worth

But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also. Philippians 2:22-23

Timothy was a proven man. The word has the meaning of character that has been proven through experience. In the ancient world, most sons grew up to be what their fathers were vocationally. If your dad was a farmer, you would most likely be a farmer, and you would learn the farming business from him. You'd learn what to grow and how to grow it and the seasons for plowing, planting, and harvesting. He was your teacher and when it came time for you to follow in his steps, you would have been proven. You knew how to farm. That is how it was with Timothy. His tutelage under Paul in the gospel prepared him for the ministry. And the leading element in this preparation was time. It took time for the truth of the gospel to be worked out in Timothy's life so that his ministry was as trustworthy as Paul's. And this is key. You want to imitate those who have proven worth. That is, they have a track record that substantiates what they say. You don't want to get hooked up with a flash in the pan – a one day wonder.

Epaphroditus also had proven worth. *I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious.* Philippians 2:25-28

Paul uses two descriptive phrases to recommend his life as proof of his approvedness: **fellow worker** and **fellow soldier**. Paul considered Epaphroditus his fellow worker, indicating that he had spent considerable time in the apostle's ministry and work and had learned the business from him. His experience in the work of the ministry set a seal on his life of proven worth. And Paul spoke of him as his fellow soldier – a word that described **a comrade in battle**. Evidently, Epaphroditus had been in the gospel trenches with Paul and had acquitted himself well. It has been said that you don't really know someone until you have seen them in action under stress, and I suppose that being in a foxhole with someone on the front lines would fit that definition. Evidently Paul had been with Epaphroditus in such situations and had concluded that he had proven worth.

Imitate those to whom the gospel is central

Paul first of all holds himself up as the example: *holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.* Philippians 2:16-18 All his running and all his laboring was in the context of the gospel. In Romans we read that he considered himself *'...set apart for the gospel of God'*. Romans 1:1 To the Corinthians he wrote that: *'I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.* 1 Corinthians 9:22b-23 And he proclaimed that: *Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!* 1 Corinthians 9:16

And so he commends Timothy to the Philippians because of the gospel's centrality in his life: *But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.* Philippians 2:22 Don't imitate those whose lives are not characterized by the centrality of the gospel. **The gospel is our daily need, our daily protection, our daily sufficiency, our daily motivation toward holiness and our daily stimulation to good works.** And anyone who says we need to move beyond the gospel to deeper things of the Christian life does not know what he is talking about. Imitate those who understand that we will never grow beyond the gospel – because **the gospel is the power of God unto salvation** – and we needed salvation from the **penalty of sin** being justified by faith – we need salvation from the **power of sin** being saved day by day – and one day we will be saved from the **presence of sin** with a new body when we see Jesus.

Imitate those who risk temporal loss for eternal gain

So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me. Philippians 2:29-30

Epaphroditus had come from Philippi all the way to Rome just to be with Paul and bring him encouragement from the saints there. Not only had he risked all the dangers of travel to be there, but he risked being identified as a friend of a criminal in being with Paul in Rome. ***If knowing Christ is really worthwhile – it is worth any risk to tell others about Him.*** If the gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God unto salvation, then no trial is too great, no cost too high, no service too hard, no loss too dear for any to bear. Apparently Epaphroditus thought so because he nearly died for the work of Christ – risking his life. ***We need to imitate those whose lives reflect an eternal hope and enjoyment in God.*** Worthy leaders who are not focused on the things of this world. Men and women who risk comfort, security, bank accounts, retirement dreams, prosperity and pleasure in this world in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus and making Him known to others. Our living and our dying is only worth anything if it reflects the glory of God.

It is clear that living a life worthy of the gospel is helped along and strengthened by consciously imitating worthy individuals in the faith whose lives reflect the highest ambition and hunger for God. We need to encourage one another in the faith by pointing to others who came before as examples worth imitating. One of the best encouragements to my soul to run the race is to read the biographies of those who came before. Men like Hudson Taylor, founder of China Inland Missions, and Cameron Townsend, founder of Wycliffe, and women like Lottie Moon, a missionary to China, and Amy Carmichael in India and so many others. We need to hear these stories and tell these stories to stir our souls to, as William Carey said, ***"Expect great things from God and attempt great things for God."***

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Hebrews 13:7

Our gracious God and Father,

Thank You for the testimony of the lives of those who have gone before. May we consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Help us to walk in obedient humility. Let the unselfish witness of our lives demonstrate the overflow of Your love and mercy toward us in radical other-centered ministry to the nations. Set Your seal of proven worth on us as we spend our lives for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Deliver us from shallow, risk-free living that does not magnify Your glory or honor Your name. Let our living reflect our eternal hope and glad enjoyment of You in all things, and help us to spread that joy through the gospel to all nations, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.